Mekong Erotics

MEN LOVING/PLEASURING/USING MEN

in Lao PDR

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Mekong Erotics: Men Loving/Pleasuring/Using Men in Lao PDR

Chris Lyttleton
Lyttleton, Chris

1. Sexual behaviour. 2. Men. 3. Lao PDR.

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Dr Chris Lyttleton

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Unprotected male-to-male sex with multiple partners is one of the three main modes of transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the Asia-Pacific region (the other two being unprotected sex in the context of sex work and unsafe injecting drug use). According to a recent report of the Commission on AIDS in Asia (2008), at least 75 percent of all HIV infections in Asia are caused directly by these three behaviors; among adolescents this figure reaches 95 percent of all infections.

In Thailand, 30.7 percent of a sample of men who have sex with men (MSM) recruited in Bangkok entertainment venues tested positive for HIV in 2007, and men who have sex with men currently contribute to 21 percent of all HIV infections in Thailand.

In Lao People Democratic Republic, a recent survey (2007) found that 5.6 percent of MSM in the capital Vientiane tested positive for HIV. Condom use is very low and the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases is high. Meanwhile, the general population prevalence of HIV stands at 0.2 percent. This would mean that a large proportion of HIV infections in Lao PDR are caused by the male-to-male transmission route – perhaps more than 75 percent of all infections.

In contrast to what was thought not very long ago, the HIV epidemic driven by male-to-male sex is not an isolated ‘boutique’ epidemic – and it probably has never been. HIV prevention among MSM is now deemed more important than ever, and Asian countries will be unable to retain their status of ‘low level’ epidemic and/or reduce overall population prevalence below 0.1 percent without scaling up HIV prevention, care and support interventions for MSM.

We know that unprotected anal sex is an effective route for transmission of HIV. It is more difficult to understand in which situations, contexts and circumstances men do or do not use condoms and water-based lubricants to protect themselves. Understanding better the context of unsafe sex will enable us to design interventions that can lead to behavior change. It is essential that we focus not only on the behavior and the context in which it takes place, but also on the individuals engaging in it and the communities in which they live. The variety of men who have sex with men is enormous in terms of age, class, religion, and ethnicity, but also in terms of self-identity and how this identity fits (or does not fit) with the society in which an individual is a part.

6 Based on personal communication between health authorities in Lao PDR and UNESCO.
It has been stated that while quantitative studies look for a limited number of attributes across a large population, qualitative studies focus on describing the wide variety of attributes across a limited number of people in a population. This serves to deepen our understanding of a problem or phenomenon – in this case the HIV vulnerability of Laotian who have sex with men.

Chris Lyttleton and research team members Thadum Sayarath, Santiphap Laungbouheuang and Chittaphone Santavasy have done an outstanding job unearthing the dynamics of male-to-male sex, sexuality and erotics in Vientiane. It is hoped that the persons responsible for designing HIV prevention programmes for MSM will take notice of this study's findings. It may remain a formidable challenge to translate its complex and in-depth findings into suggestions and inputs for behavior change communication. In many countries, there is a wealth of data and information, but it is often not effectively shared, used and applied. UNESCO is eager to continue to contribute to better and more effective HIV prevention, care and support interventions for MSM in Lao PDR, including the task of putting the key findings and recommendations from this study into practice.

After having supported research on MSM in Cambodia and Viet Nam, UNESCO Bangkok is proud to have supported this effort in Lao PDR. To our knowledge, it is the first in-depth ethnographic study of male-to-male sex in the country to date. We hope it will inspire other countries and cities to do the same.

Sheldon Shaeffer
Director, UNESCO Bangkok

7 In Cambodia, UNESCO supported an ethnographic study on male-to-male sexuality, which was conducted by the Cambodian anthropologist Phong Tan. In 2004, UNESCO supported a research on awareness of HIV/AIDS and HIV vulnerability of MSM in Hai Phong, Viet Nam. The results were used for programme design and were not published.
Introduction

Prelude

Late in our study, the research team is sitting in a small salon. It has three or four beauticians tending to customers. It is way down a dusty road on the outskirts of Vientiane, the small capital of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), or Laos. The road is having drainage pipes dug into its edges, which makes for awkward access and noisy conversation. Inside, Suk is attaching hair extensions to a customer sitting in front of a mirror. Another woman is being attended to by a soft-faced man named Phe – his hair is short, hers is being washed. Suk, ‘herself’, has flowing hair and smooth skin that is only possible after months of hormone intake (which, in local practice, means taking huge numbers of contraception pills). Like her customer, Suk calls herself kathoey. Phe is not sure which word is better, but he prefers ‘gay’ over kathoey. He has a Western boyfriend. It is popular knowledge amongst Laotian men who are looking for Western lovers that they prefer men with short hair.

It is a scene that the research team has encountered often. Beauty shops are the prime locale associated with both work and sociality for kathoey. It has been this way for generations. Although today wearing jeans and a tee-shirt, the evening before Suk had paraded a sequined gown while at a fashion show organized by a Population Services International (PSI) health programme that works specifically with kathoey. At the party, she said she was about to go to Thailand (again). If she can’t ‘sell well’ in the red-light town of Pattaya this time she will go to Phuket, a different sort of tourist zone. She wants to meet more Westerners – there is more money with these men she tells us, and maybe more chance of longer-term emotional and financial support. But she will have to try being ‘gay’. Only old men come to see kathoey, she says. Short hair she can do – but more than that she says she does not know. Can she ‘do gay’ in sexual terms? She is unsure.

Several weeks earlier, we had been in a northern province, the capital of which is nowadays recognized in global gay networks as a popular, exotic tourist destination. We were taken to a rural area by W, a kathoey who had been introduced to us through volunteer networks. Here people have never heard of ‘gay’ and have no idea what it means for changing understandings of sexuality. In this respect, we might be anywhere in Laos. Some distance down a dusty road we reach E’s house, tucked just off the road and nestled in the midst of the haphazard geometry of rice-fields and small vegetable plots. He inherited this land from his parents, and built his own small two-story wooden house near the road to stay in closer contact with the social world of the small district in which he lives. Across the road is a secondary school that has several dorms which are a temporary home to many students from more remote rural areas. The day we visit, a Saturday, a teacher from the school and a couple of local women are playing cards with E. They invest each hand with such heavy enthusiasm that it seems almost mismatched to the potential prize of a few cents. On the other side of the room, several high school students (male and female) loll about watching MTV that arrives by virtue of the large satellite dish behind his house.
E is expecting more students in the evening. This time it will be young men (*phu bao*). They often come over and hang out. E’s house is a welcome source of entertainment and socializing away from the concrete, unadorned and crowded dorm rooms. E usually has beer or whiskey to drink. Quite possibly, several *kathoey* will visit from the nearby city. E’s house is well known as a spot to meet up with younger students. Sex typically takes place at some point in the evening between the various visitors. It is casual, common, hardly private and usually involves a number of rotating partners. E is 28 and unabashedly *kathoey*, although he dresses as a male and has short hair. When he was younger, he slept with women after he was dropped by a boyfriend, but now has sex exclusively with guys. Some married men pay him. He finds it easy to find partners, given his house’s location away from the town, but close to the boarding school. As he puts it: “It’s easy to get guys here – the students have nothing else to do. They come and hang out and want sex; in the towns, the *phu bao* are much more into the game, they always want money.”

Sex between men takes place in numerous different contexts in Laos. It is not simply that local ‘sexuality’ differs from Western notions of homosexuality. Nor is there a uniform version of non-western Lao male-male sexuality to which we can refer. There are multiple cultural logics that shape how men who have sex with other men understand and experience their lives. They entail intersections of localised belief systems and global sources of identification. One crucial issue is what sexual relations mean to the actors involved. At its most basic, how two people perceive their relationship will be a key determinant of whether HIV risk is also present, and on whether condoms are used or not. To uncover what relationships mean, the following report examines social factors of age, occupational role and economics, as well as more complicated issues of emotional needs and sexual desire. These are not easy topics to canvas comprehensively. They are, however, crucial to making HIV programmes more effective.

**The Setting: Downtown Laos**

In September 2006, local and international HIV educators collaborated to host “The Exchange and Learning Workshop for Field Workers in HIV Prevention Projects for Men Having Sex with Men in the Greater Mekong Sub-region” in downtown Vientiane. It was the first time such a topic had been publicly addressed in this way in Laos. Over three days, men (and several women) from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam did precisely as indicated – they exchanged and learned. Groups from each country spoke of their experiences in working with men who are either at significant risk of becoming infected with HIV because of their choice of partner or, if they are already infected, who face serious obstacles in receiving timely and equitable treatment.

At face value, this description of risk might define many men in the region because sexual spread of HIV is notable in both hetero and homosexual interactions. But, to date, in all South-East Asian countries, most attention has focused on heterosexual spread. This meeting was called together on the very premise that men who have sex with men remain an inadequately addressed constituency in HIV programming for reasons largely linked to widespread marginalization. Thus, the workshop explored how to improve styles of working in social contexts where implementing health programmes with MSM is recognized as difficult no matter the country.
The meeting allowed participants to exchange notes on various social constraints that hinder up-front and progressive implementation of health initiatives. That the workshop took place was seminal in the most direct sense of the word. Male sexuality was logically at the forefront and, as such, represented a major advance in the elevation of non-normative sexuality as the basis of a high profile meeting. Although local reporting was fairly quiet on its occurrence, this meeting signified a more urgent openness within Laos for using health as the rationale for talking straight about ‘non-straight’ sex.

Three months later, this UNESCO-funded qualitative study was approved. This study is not the first exploration of male-male sexuality in Laos; however, the AIDS section of the Lao Ministry of Health (CHAS) promoted this research because it determined that more needed to be ‘known’ about male sexuality.

Indeed, the study has been part of a wave of initiatives. In 2007, for the first time, male-male sexuality interventions in Laos formed part of the Global Fund distribution of funding, which also included a sero-surveillance of MSM. In January of that year, five months after the workshop, the Lao Centre for HIV/AIDS/STIs (CHAS) held its first national meeting on preventing AIDS amongst men who have sex with men. A number of concrete objectives were tabled:

- To determine the scope of responses on MSM activities implemented by different stakeholders in Laos.
- To share experiences from national and regional workshops and conferences.
- To determine challenges and constraints in the implementation of MSM activities and determine possible solutions.
- To inform the Global Fund Round VI on MSM activities and develop future plans.
- To form a task force on MSM.

Clearly an issue come of its time, and not just for regional or national workshops.

In the course of this research, it became apparent that there is a widespread perception in both urban and rural sectors that the number of men who enjoy male-male sex is increasing in Laos. Most typically, this is phrased in terms of specific identities: people from all walks of life comment on the more obvious number of kathoeys. Some people in urban centres might also use the word ‘gay,’ although there is broad variation in what they take this word to mean. The perception of more kathoeys is partially the product of the high level flow of media from Thailand that has elevated male-male sexuality in recent years as a prime source of entertainment, exposés and news shows. At the same time, it also stems from a far more visible presence of men displaying their attraction to other men. In conjunction with this growing public presence of male-male sexual appeal, a growing climate of concern over HIV spread between men who have sex with men is evident throughout Asia, including in Laos.

In what follows, we do not wish to focus exclusively on specific risk practices of men who engage in sex with other men. What we intend to do is provide a more thorough consideration of the various forces that shape the everyday lives of men who are part of this growing

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8 The 2007 sero-surveillance study was done in collaboration with the Centre for Disease Control, Bangkok, Thailand.
incidence of male-male relationships in Laos. It is not simply a question of describing an ‘underground’ landscape of sexual diversity, nor of focusing on biological or psychological variables of men in this context. Rather, there are very specific social, economic, political and cultural factors that govern the increased presence and profile of male-male sexuality, as well as the way relationships are structured and experienced. This study will then, in turn, link the range of motivations, understandings and experiences involved in male sexuality back to HIV transmission and the serious threat it represents to Lao society.

The Sexual Landscape is Changing

Laos is a socialist country with a small (just over 6 million), largely rural population. Urban centres are growing quickly as economic reforms offer new opportunities in work and education amidst a rapidly modernizing consumer culture. Laos has no public or commercialised sex scene, ‘gay’ or otherwise, to rival some of its neighbours, although it is neither minimal nor always discrete. This means there is no single and familiar point of entry into male-male sexuality through which to introduce HIV programmes. There are, of course, numerous influences on popular display of sexuality, which are both locally and internationally driven. While the Lao Government remains staunch in its concern over public image (including discouraging local media portrayal of issues surrounding sexuality), it has proven impossible to prohibit the appeal of Thai soap operas and movies broadcast into most Lao homes, some of which feature quite major roles for Thai kathoeys.

While Thailand and Laos share many social, cultural and linguistic similarities, as well as roughly 1,700 kilometers of land and river border, there are also profound differences. Socially, politically and economically, the two countries have charted markedly different courses in the past hundred years. The scale, cultural familiarity and major step-up in modern values they represent make contemporary Thai media and fashion tremendously appealing to most Laotians. So, too, is an almost requisite visit to the Thai cities (short- or long-term) for many Laotians living close to the Thai border. In short, while Viet Nam (and even China) might represent key political influences in Laos, Thailand is the paramount source of cultural and commercial trends.

Many Laotians with whom we spoke were, therefore, quick to attribute the apparent increasing presence of kathoeys (and the nascent presence of ‘gay’ as a social category) to Thai influence. For some, it generates an undertcurrent of concern over an ever-increasing public appreciation of kathoeys as entertainment figures and, thereby, role models. For others, it is a welcome sign of a society becoming more accepting. Many, indeed, sense an increased social space for demonstrations of sexual liberalness. However, while sexuality is becoming more commercialized in everyday Lao life as marketplace reforms increase commodification on numerous levels, local radio or television remains heavily controlled and typically avoids inclusion of sexual material of any nature. This, in turn, creates an automatic market for Thai television and radio broadcasts from across the border – and there are a number of Thai movies starring and telling the stories of kathoeys - plus a staggering number of illicit heterosexual and homosexual porn movies on pirated VCDs.

As a fairly notable exception to the dearth of sexuality-related items in the media, one recent story appeared in the November 2006 issue of the new Lao glossy magazine Vision. A female corpse was seen draped across electricity lines at the top of a power pylon. Apparently, so the
story tells us, a 16-year-old female, Noi, was driven to suicide. She somehow clambered to the top of the pole and electrocuted herself. According to the article, the factors contributing to Noi’s untimely death included a broken heart, jilted love affair, and school problems. The exposé centers on one ‘obvious’ reason: a history of family strife over her repeated rebelliousness in bringing other women home to spend the night. The story is blunt – Noi insistently flaunted lesbianism in her own home in face of major family dissent, driving her to orchestrate her own gruesome death.

This is an extreme and exceptional tale – most same-sex practices are quietly absorbed within Lao society. This study did not find any such stories on male-male sexual identity and its consequences in print - but the point is clear: same sex practice is not a seamless integration. This research has not sought to investigate female-female sexuality, although in discussions it did emerge often enough. By and large, lesbianism remains profoundly undisclosed and unseen in Lao society. The same cannot be said for male-male sexuality, where throughout Laos the commonplace presence of the kathoey symbolises non-normative ways of embodying gender and sexuality. Despite a general widespread tolerance of male homo-eroticism in Laos, most local men would agree that stigma remains an issue. Many men keep their sexual lives highly discrete, but for those who don’t, prejudice emerges in numerous and subtle ways. For example, slang terms such as maeng tai bua - a poisonous insect that can kill those it bites - is still a common derogatory label used to depict kathoey. It is generally felt that women are jealous of kathoey for their social and aesthetic skills. Their distaste is often more soft-edged than that from men, who feel more strongly that kathoey have somehow relinquished their birthright as males (sia khwampenphuxai, sia xaat gert). Overt violence is not common, but nor is it entirely absent.

It is within this context of commonplace, but seldom sharp-edged, social discrimination and a general lack of attention to male sexuality that this research was initiated. This report is a qualitative study. It has not aimed to quantify levels of HIV risk that other reports on MSM in Asia usefully offer us. To date, most studies of MSM in Asia have treated male sexuality as if it were the sum of a series of identifiable acts that can be described and counted as if they were purely instrumental in some form of sexual release. Recent workshops on MSM have suggested that in order to tackle HIV more effectively, we need to think more broadly of ‘cultures’ of sexuality in addition to analysing of numbers of partners and where and when these relationships take place. This research is intended to build on existing empirical analyses of MSM risk behaviour to show complex ways in which men make meaning of their sexual lives and how this, in turn, leads to HIV risk in specific ways. We do not cover issues of treatment and support for those infected.

**Objectives**

This study was undertaken with the following objectives:

- Provide information on the range of men engaging in same sex practices in Lao PDR and variance in HIV risk practices.
- Examine how sexual practices influence a sense of self-identity for men engaging in same-sex sexual interactions. Understand how this identity, in turn, influences choice of sexual partners and types of physical and emotional engagement.
• Gain knowledge of how safer sex practices differ depending on partner, type of relationship and social and geographic context.
• Make recommendations that allow sero-prevalence surveys and intervention programmes to be designed around comprehensive knowledge of socio-cultural, economic and geographical factors governing same sex behaviour.

Research Methodology

To collect data, the research team spent a total of eight weeks between December 2006 and February 2007 talking with many men (and a small number of women). We focused our data collection primarily in the current capital of Vientiane and in the old capital of Luang Prabang. Vientiane is a bustling small city, struggling to modernize in a more global marketplace after 20 years of Soviet influence. It is gradually becoming the economic hub of Laos. Luang Prabang is the undisputable tourist centre of Laos and, with its old world charm, elevated as a World Heritage site by UNESCO. We also went up-province to a backpacker mecca known as Vang Vieng and to the small provincial town of Talaat, which caters to Laotian tourists rather than foreigners. We briefly went to rural areas outside the abovementioned towns.

In all, we spoke at some length to 93 men. We sought to interview men from a range of backgrounds. This included:
• Men who are overtly effeminate a majority of the time (long-hair katheoys)
• Men who act effeminately, but who depending on circumstances, may also choose not to do so (short-haired katheoys)
• Men who identify as gay, but not katheoey
• Single men who have sex with men on occasion, but who do not identify as gay or katheoey (partners of katheoys or gay men)
• Married men who have sex with men

Eighty of these men told us of their sexual interactions with other men. Less than ten had not yet had sex; several others did not disclose their sexual experience. Insofar as men identified themselves with categories, our sample included: 43 katheoys (less than half often dress as women) 16 men felt themselves to be gay (mainly in Vientiane) and 15 men considered themselves ‘full’ men. As we will see, none of these categories are watertight. The majority of these men were under 30 years, most unmarried, but not all. These overt details are summarized in Annex 1 (pp. 78-80).

Our conversations with each of these men usually took place in a small restaurant or coffee bar near the river or some other outdoor venue where we could converse easily. Occasionally, we visited men at their workplace or home. Typically we would converse for between 2-3 hours. Sometimes we would meet with informants several times, but this was not the norm. Our conversations followed a general pattern, but focused on different specifics depending on the situation and background of the informant. Discussion topics included:

  i. Sexual history, past and present
  ii. Types of sexual practice, including notions of pleasure and love in real, imagined and idealised relationships
iii. Notions of exchange and reciprocity within these relationships in emotional, material and sexual terms

iv. Social issues of disclosure and acceptance amongst family, employment and larger social orders

v. The extent to which awareness of HIV/AIDS and condom use influences, or is influenced by, any of the above

Our team consisted of a Western anthropologist who speaks good Lao and three Laotian researchers. Our conversations were all in Lao. Two of the researchers, Santi and Kaew, volunteer with Burnet Institute in a male sexuality outreach project. These two men are familiar with project organization and outreach work. They are open about their own sexual preference for other men, and were comfortable with their social identities being used as a means to introduce the project to other men and extend invitations to talk with us. The third member, Chittaphone, is female, experienced with applied research, and fluent in English. She has also been responsible for managing logistics, transcribing notes into English and preparing summary tables. A representative from CHAS accompanied us during the research, although she was cautious about the potential sensitivity of some informants and maintained a discrete presence. Likewise, provincial representatives from AIDS committees assisted us with introductions and familiarized the team with local contexts.

We usually conducted interviews as a team; sometimes all four of us would chat or sometimes we would divide into smaller groups. Occasionally, we spoke with 2-3 men together, although most times we spoke with individuals. No notes were taken during the conversations, nor any form of tape recording used. It was immediately apparent that doing so would drastically reduce the degree of open exchange. Instead, notes were taken of each conversation after the interviews.

Labels and Language

Several introductory points need to be established. MSM is an awkward typology and not a local term. It is meaningless in everyday conversation. Kathoey is the local vernacular catch-all term. It depicts a gender identity (somewhat feminine), a sexual orientation (towards men) and social category (somewhat valorized in very specific situations, but more broadly stigmatized when placed against normative male-female identities) with a long history in local Thai, Cambodian and Lao cultures. Using this term is not unproblematic either, and in the face of a growing global activism and its impact on local identity politics, it is becoming regarded as unpopular in some circles due to commonplace derogatory connotations. It is also problematic in that it both conjures a stereotype of highly effeminate transgender and yet, at the same time, is used to label anyone who predominantly enjoys sex with men. We also use the term kathoey extensively to reflect this wide degree of local usage. Nonetheless, we stress that many men who fall within its broad parameters do not necessarily dress as women and can move readily within masculine modes of identification. An important point is that male-male sex can increasingly take place without one partner demonstrating overt femininity.

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9 Burnet Institute also handled the logistic arrangements and institutional affiliations for this research.
The term ‘gay’ is not yet widespread in either linguistic or subjective terms. While most forms of homo-eroticism constellate around the kathoey - ‘full’ male dyad, the term gay is recently becoming used in larger urban centres, in part as a result of increasing internationalism of sexuality within Laos. To date, ‘gay’ is understood in particular ways that have little to do with social solidarity or advocacy for greater social or political representation in any context linked to sexuality. Indeed, the type of civil activism and identity politics around sexual liberation, both female and male, that characterised the West from the late 1960s onwards is not yet evident in Laos (it is unclear if it ever will be). There is no gay or lesbian political movement in Laos, and while Edmund White might have wittily remarked that the 1968 Stonewall riots were a ‘swish’ that was heard around the world, it is sobering to remember that in Laos, the more prominent sound at the time was exploding ordinance. Instead, gay is only a recently budding social category that allows men to be more open in their sexuality in ways that maintain links to normative masculinity, with its social pressure to become part of a domestic social unit – the family. Nonetheless, as recognition of the gay social category grows, it becomes essential to consider its societal impact.

Indeed, there are different modes of social and personal categorization, that is to say different subject positions, associated with sexuality. Some Laotian and women see their sexual behaviour as being of paramount importance to who they ‘are’, but others (perhaps the majority) pay it little heed and expect their friends and social contacts to do likewise. Lao society offers these choices for many, although not all. Sometimes people move freely between different subject positions defined to differing degrees by sexuality – the much commented ‘fluidity’ of Asian gender/sexuality. Thus, we tread cautiously in using catch-all terms: kathoey and/or gay. But we cannot avoid them. Likewise, the term for male partners of kathoey is equivalent to (but not the same as) ‘straight’ – typically the word phu bao meaning ‘lad’ is used. It has connotations of being young and unmarried rather than being strictly heterosexually, but preferred sexuality (liking women) is implied in the associated descriptions of lads as ‘full’ men or 100% males (phu xai tem loi).

Secondly, to write of kathoey in English one has to choose the pronoun he or she. While effeminate behavior (and sometimes female dress) is generally a characteristic of kathoey, to regularly adopt ‘she’ is awkward for our report because in most descriptions we use the term ‘men’ as a reflection of the majority opinion on social identification. Were physiology to be a more suitable mode of categorization - which it isn’t - there was only one person in our sample who had undergone surgery. In fact, many kathoey themselves argue for a third term and describe the common feeling of uncomfortable pigeonholing when asked to choose either male/female on identification cards and other institutional formalities. We must be quite clear at the outset, most kathoey we spoke with do not think of themselves as women (although some do repeat the description of feeling like a woman in a man’s body). Only a few wish to physically become women. Nor do they feel themselves to be complete men. Most commonly, they see themselves as a mixture, a combination, something in between, something different. Some kathoey will move between positions of ‘he’ and ‘she’ in their self-depictions very easily, as if to make the point neither is adequate. Point taken, but for ease of transcription here we will mostly use ‘he’ with the caveat that in some cases the ‘he’ to which we are referring takes on many aspects of femaleness. Sometimes where it is a brief vignette, the use of ‘she’ is easy and appropriate. Likewise, we use the term male-male sex when describing kathoey
and their partners even though it is not completely accurate within the context of socialized perception.

Contents

What follows comes from a synthesis of many men telling us their thoughts and experiences. Our summaries are provisional and, indeed, raw. I, as the author, have no prior experience with MSM groups in Laos. On the other hand, members of our team do have intimate knowledge of same-sex networks and practices and deep insights into the affective economy within male same-sex circles. We have utilized the background and experiences of our team as information every bit as relevant as that coming from more clearly defined informants.

We, thus, draw our pictures together from both the remarkable openness with which men responded to our questioning coupled with the familiarity members of our team have with a number of social and sexual networks in Laos. In part, this is structural. Santi and Kaew are members of a large number of volunteers who work for Burnet Institute's outreach programme that targets young men, most specifically those who have sex with other men. They were able to draw on some of these volunteers as informants who readily provided frank and forthright information. They were also able to utilize well-developed networks of social contacts outside of the volunteer groups. Here, they were able to extend an emotional sense of belonging that is generated by prominent forms of socio-sexual minoritization into opportunities for open exchange. In Laos, it is said men (meaning MSM) can speak to men more easily if they speak the same language due to innate recognition (ghosts can talk to ghosts - phi lom gap phi). This recognition meant in many cases a pre-determined willingness to interact. In short, while a few men were reticent to discuss their lives with us, a large number were not. We hope the report captures their forthrightness in discussing their lives with us.

Chapter 1 canvases the historical evolution of these commonplace categories used to pigeonhole the diversity alluded to above in order to develop a framework for thinking through the complex intersection of sexuality and broader social forces. The key point is that there are multiple styles of identification within the broad arena of male-male sexuality running a continuum from complete 100% male (phu xai tem loy) to highly feminized transgender (kathoey phom yaaw). 'Gay' is creating room to belong somewhere between these poles. None of these are fixed positions.

Chapter 2 considers what it means to suggest the number of men who enjoy sex with other men is increasing in Laos, and how stigma still determines the manner in which men make this public knowledge.

Chapters 3 examines how age, work and material exchange shape the way relationships take place. We will concentrate on kathoey - ‘full’ man relationships, but we also consider the growing presence of gay self-identification and what this means for male-male relationships.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine how sexuality is experienced in terms of love and desire between different parties: how this is embodied differently within different groups of men: how this creates certain possibilities for certain sorts of relationships and by the same token disallows others. The situation is not static – we demonstrate trends within a changing landscape of sexual relations.
Chapter 6 looks at HIV risk. To those readers who are solely interested in this issue, skip the preceding chapters and go straight to this one. Our chief finding is that HIV risk is linked to the constant number of fleeting sexual encounters wherein safe sex is secondary to the emotional and physical demands of the relationship. It is not an issue of knowledge; rather of cultural and social expectations.

In order to bring the men we talked with more centre stage in this report, we will include vignettes and nutshell life stories in the Annex (pp. 81-113). They are not fiction. We asked some of the men whom we came to know to write examples of sexual experiences in specific venues and of key events in their lives. Men working as part of our team also contributed descriptions of venues and modes of contact they have experienced on their own or with friends. They are important because descriptions like these are the substrate to all we discuss in the following chapters. They flesh out the more abstract level of analysis. They highlight a range of experiences and types of engagement. We see that relationships are frequent, multiple, mostly casual and premised on specific expectations. Informant’s names have all been changed. In deference to local authorities, we have generally avoided using place names.
Chapter 1

Conceptual Beginnings
Categories and Continuums

Bodies do not come with ready-made sexualities. Bodies are not even attracted to other bodies – it is human subjects who are attracted to various objects including bodies, and the features of bodies that render them desirable to human subjects are contingent upon cultural codes, social conventions and the political institutions that structure and inform human subjectivity itself, thereby shaping our individual erotic ideals and defining the scope of what we find attractive.

-Halperin 1992:260

Sexuality is about more than physical acts. This is the basic premise of this report. If it were simply physical, sexuality would not have the powerful resonance in people’s lives that it does. Rather, it is an intense constellation of meaning that in diverse ways brings together physical and non-physical aspects of being. Put simply - sex, in all its incarnations, is full of meaning. This is the immediate and most relevant issue when we consider male-male sexuality in Laos. It is marked most clearly by many different subjective positions; that is to say, men understand male sex and what it means in various ways. In turn, this has immediate implications for how men position themselves (or are positioned) in relation to HIV transmission and practices that might reduce this.

The use of the term MSM emerges from the recognition that physically identical acts are not understood in the same way in different cultural contexts. Thus, MSM became a way to categorise examples of same-sex eroticism that looked nothing like Western gay communities. Its use assumes that Western gay modes of social and subjective identification cannot be transposed to other cultural settings in order to understand what informs and motivates people.

The term does have its difficulties, however, given its overarching and generic use for the incidence of (male) anal sex wherever and whenever it occurs. As Patton notes: it is “comprehensible to everyone and meaningful to no one” (Patton 2002:84). Dowsett (2006) described MSM as still an “analogue for gay men, in that it seeks to place MSM alongside intravenous drug users (IDU) and sex workers in an equivalence,” but problematically “MSM is not a bounded population like sex workers or IDU; it is a concept without a centre and theoretically inadequate.” Nevertheless MSM is employed all over the world precisely because it has been recognized that social significance and subjective meaning attached to sexual acts varies noticeably between and within different cultures. It is this diversity that we must confront first and foremost.
Local Diversity

Sexual diversity in Asia (and worldwide) is now well recognized. It has required the spectre of HIV/AIDS to allow this to be included in levels of public and policy discussion. Throughout the region, there are high levels of HIV risk as stigma and discrimination coupled with social disavowal have marginalized MSM and often rendered them invisible. Oft-quoted figures confirm this. In various Asian countries, rates of HIV among MSM are considerably higher than national averages (see UNAIDS, 2006). Although we know male-male sex is commonplace (see TREAT 2006 for a summary of survey data on MSM estimates in different Asian countries), men who enjoy homo-eroticism can never be a target group per se. The range of situations in which same sex occurs means we have no geography, no demography, no socio-economic status, no occupational classification and limited self-acknowledged identity by which we can delimit and draw within the sights of unified programme activities. In turn, this adds to the potential for on-going HIV transmission. As TREAT notes:

The complexity of MSM populations in Asia means that there are both dense networks and overlapping looser networks made up of more widely dispersed individuals who have male-male sex more sporadically and opportunistically. The first group can provide the substrate for initial rapid rises in prevalence rates, and the second group can provide the conduit for spread to wider populations. (2006:8)

It is therefore crucial that we appreciate not only the more public collectives of men who have sex with men, but also the various networks that intersect with, or operate independently of, those men who are open in their preference for male partners.

This brings us to the recognition that it is not just a context of global diversity in meanings and identity associated with same-sex sexuality. Even within the Asian region, our findings show there are distinct differences between male-male sexual relations in Laos compared to Thailand and Cambodia. So, too, there is tremendous diversity within Laos. For instance, over the two months of talking with men who are part of the sexual and affective economy of same-sex relationships in Laos, we encountered many contradictions:

- We met men who are seldom, if ever, sexually active; we met others who have sex with many men in one night, sometimes in groups.
- Some told us of the money they make from sex; others told us how much they pay for sex.
- We met men who began experiencing sexual interactions with other men at the onset of or even before puberty. We met men who in their twenties desire men, but remain sexually inexperienced.
- Some believe monogamy the ideal; most believe it is impossible.
- We met men who wish to remain pure to the dream of love for one man; we met men who wish for this, but sadly believe love is not possible between men.
- Some men told us of the need for wives and children to grow old happily; others told us about their preference for Western or Thai ‘husbands’.
- Some told us they like to be penetrated; others told us they could not abide this.
- Some enjoy having erections; others try to hide or suppress them.
Some men use condoms; others don’t.
Some men feel they are ‘gay’, some feel they are kathoey, some feel they are 100% men, some regard all three as possibilities.
Some men love kathoey; others are afraid of them.
Some men like sex with men, but not kathoey; some men will only have sex with kathoey.
Some women are threatened by kathoey, sometimes less (but sometimes more so) than their husbands or boyfriends.
Some men pay for tertiary education by sleeping with other men.
Some men pay for entertaining their girlfriends by sleeping with other men.
Some men pay for sex with younger men by sleeping with older men.
Some men think that desire for male sex is based on biology; others think it is a spiritual outcome (karma).
Some men feel they are women’s souls in men’s bodies; others feel they just like anal sex.

But even in the face of this diversity and its potential to exacerbate HIV risk, we must nonetheless use categories of people in order to consider relationships and relative risk in the first place. Sexuality is by no means random. There are distinct structures and patterns that shape how male-male relations take place. As mentioned, in Laos, kathoey is the key catch-all identity for non-normative male sexuality and used commonly in local descriptions for anyone who demonstrates a preference for male-male sex. Social conditioning pushes men into forms of transgenderism that form the classic stereotype of a kathoey. However, not all choose to follow suit and, thus, maintain various degrees of masculine identification.

Although it is arguable how much similarity, or even continuity, there is between contemporary forms of kathoey identity and those that existed in the past (see Jackson, nd), the social identity to which it refers has a long history in South-East Asia. For example, a British consul writing in the late 19th century observed:

In Siam, especially in the North, there are a certain number of men who habitually wear female clothing and grow their hair long. It does not seem to be thought that there is anything morally wrong about this, and so far as I have been able to make out, these phuumias (men-women) as they are called, really possess, as a rule, no moral eccentricities. Physically also, I am told, there is nothing unusual about them. They prefer to dress as women and that is all there is to say about it. (quoted in Totman, 2003:1981)

Regardless of degrees of historical change, kathoeys and their ‘straight’ partners remain a logical starting point for any study of MSM in Thailand or Laos. Even though male-male sexuality is by no means limited to this pattern, it is the most prominent depiction within local public discourse about male sexuality and, in what follows, forms the core of our analysis. A key issue relevant to both countries is that while there is no law against homosexuality, there are very specific social sanctions. Thus, on the one hand, there is minimal guilt or stigma attached to male-male physical contact which “facilitates many of the boys having their first experiences of sexual excitation with other boys” (Werasit, Brown and Surapone, 1991:104), which in turn creates a “relative fluidity of male sexuality in Thailand, with many men apparently moving from sexual relations with women to men with relative ease” (Jackson, 1989:212). On the other hand,
we have important distinctions made between being either the receptive or the penetrating partner. That is, so long as the ‘man’ remains the active partner – he penetrates rather than receives within the sexual interaction – then he remains a ‘man’. To be the receptive partner is indicative of non-masculinity. Thus, conventional typologies describe a tripartite system: men, women and kathoey, wherein the kathoey is associated with ‘passive’ femininity and invariably associated with being the submissive ‘feminine’ sexual partner in male-male sex. The kathoey becomes an alternative possibility to male-female couplets: the third sex (phet saam) or the second type of female (praphet thii song).

Within this tripartite framework, social pressure on men to marry and have families has lead to a widespread tendency to accept bi-sexuality as preferable to a more distinct gay identity (Werasit et al, 1991:98) while the overriding social value of separating the public from the private ensures that certain aspects of life remain less regulated by social censure. Certainly in the past, those men who prefer homosexual sex very often marry and lead outwardly acceptable family lives. This description derived from studies in Thailand still typifies much of contemporary Laos, as well, where it is widely recognised that some married men have male lovers.

Jackson (1997) describes how in addition to the long-term presence of kathoey, gay subculture ‘boomed’ in Thailand in the late 1980s and 1990s. In this portrayal, gay has emerged as a recognized form of male homoeroticism that may have existed quietly in earlier times, but is only recently gaining a significant public profile through the media, gathering venues and public display of same-sex sexuality. Laos is not yet at this stage: ‘gay’ is just beginning to be used in Laos as a term and a mode of identification, and it remains to be seen whether it will gain the same social and political ‘rights-based’ profile as in Thailand. Nevertheless, many of the underlying dynamics between kathoey, gay and straight men are similar, and useful comparisons can be drawn.

**Local Categories: Kathoey-Man-Gay**

It has been argued that ‘gay’ has become present in developing countries all over the world for reasons linked to the globalization of identity politics (Altman, 2003) and HIV/AIDS programmes (Patton, 2004). In turn, this might be understood as either empowering or belittling to ‘local’ versions of sexuality (Boellstorff, 2005:27). Either way, Westerners and Asians alike come to Laos to look for sex along with other holiday pleasures. Some find female partners; some find male partners. A cursory glance at Internet sites addressing gay travelers offers hints of a gay sensibility focusing on Laos:

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10 To date, there has been little in the way of social interventions to control sexual interactions between men because Thailand (and Laos) has a very strong public/private ethos where what goes on behind closed doors is widely tolerated. This has led to a widespread perception that Thailand is more fluid and more tolerant than the West. This is not altogether accurate. Not only do distinct patterns shape sexuality, but the means of social policing are also different. So long as a Thai homosexual man or woman maintains a normative pattern of masculinity and femininity, he or she will largely escape sanctions. There are not strong state or religious attempts to enforce compliance to heterosexuality, but shame and gossip do act informally as strong means of social control. Kathoey are generally depicted as a stigmatised category, but not a social problem, per se, unless they get ‘too’ public.
Laos is a lovely place for visitors to the region. Gays are becoming quite visible within Lao society.

Don’t travel to Laos expecting a sophisticated gay scene. Instead, enjoy the quiet and familial tolerance towards local gays who have begun to stand out…..

If you are looking for the gay community in Vientiane, this is probably one of the very few to be found. The little family extended their warmth as I peeked in to gay life in this culture so beaten up by colonial and militaristic intruders over the past couple of hundred years. Contrary to my prior impressions, these gentlefolks were not fearful of getting busted or hiding in dark shame. Instead they were playful, open to talking, relaxed and obviously enjoying each others company.

Also he (the local gay guide) showed me Nam Phu square near to the Laos Plaza Hotel. There are many ladyboys [kathoeys] and gays cruising around there in the late afternoon (for money). But I was nervous because he looked so different from me with his clothes; he was very feminine and everyone seemed to look at us. So that was my first expedition with a gay guide.

Within the realm of male-male sexuality in Laos, gay and kathoey are terms that people use (or are used for them) as a means of signaling ‘who they are’ and at the same time indicate ‘who they are not’. In response to various forces, however, the use of these terms and the identification they represent is changing. Thailand offers examples of this trajectory.

In the past, a Thai male has either regarded himself as a ‘man’ or a kathoey (Jackson, 1997:172). This was the only choice on offer. Gay emerged as a distinct social form that falls between alternate poles of Thai maleness. In this framework, Thai gay men seek to distance themselves from kathoeys by carefully not relinquishing outward display of male gender; that is, they do not take on the feminine characteristics of the kathoey. Male demonstration of aspects of female gender is, for all intents and purposes, more socially unacceptable than same-sex practices of gay men. In other words, it is more problematic to behave openly like a woman than to have sex with another man. Jackson, therefore, suggests that the Thai gay man strategically “regards himself as more different from a kathoey than from a heterosexual man” (1997:182) precisely because it is more important for him to avoid the social stigma associated with feminized males than the lesser stigma attached to male-male sex. Storer agrees that the term ‘gay’ acts as a means of denying the attributed femininity associated with male homo-eroticism. At the same time, he tells us that the term generates much confusion.

But while terms like gay, gay king and gay queen have been appropriated and re-invented into the Thai vernacular, they lack coherence and mean different things to different people. For some, gay has been used as a label for ‘modern’ and ‘egalitarian’ homosexuality through a process of stigma transformation; for others, it has become a euphemism for men who are homosexually penetrated…..Thus, a homosexually active Thai man may eschew naming himself gay, associating it with behaviour expected of kathoey. Yim, another self-identified gay man, resisted the notion that he had to be either active or receptive (ie. king or queen). For him, gay means exclusive sexual relations with other men and ‘being able to do everything. (1999: 9-10)

11 http://www.utopia-asia.com/tipslaos.htm
12 http://globalgayz.com/q-laos.htm
Like the above description, the data from Laos is by no means clear-cut; most men that we spoke with who have homoerotic pleasure with other men remain, at this point in time, unsure precisely what ‘gay’ entails as a personal identity – some wonder whether they should call themselves ‘gay’; or whether they want to. In many parts of the country, the term has no impact whatsoever. Where it is known, it is most commonly taken to mean someone who has sex with both a man and a woman – or has the potential to do so. As yet, there also appears to be far less clear (ontological) distinction between the gay and \textit{kathoey} in Laos compared to either Thailand or Cambodia, where long-haired and short-haired men who fit within the overall cap of MSM seldom mix and or move between these modes of social identity. Even where it is used, ‘gay’ has no notion of rights-based empowerment associated with it.

In other important respects, the landscape is similar. In popular media in Thailand and popular discourse in Laos, the word \textit{kathoey} has become a cultural stereotype employed in many ways from mild-mannered fun through to scornful derision. Just as in Thailand, this is beginning to provide the rationale for gay to differentiate itself. Just as in Thailand, \textit{kathoey} have had a historical presence in Laos, and men who regard themselves as 100\% male will sleep with \textit{kathoeys} with little or no social stigma. In the urban centres, ‘gay’ has become included in local vocabulary and indicative of new ways that sexual identity can be discursively approached and internalized alongside the more conventional \textit{phu bao-kathoey} coupling. The changes come primarily from a combination of Western visitors and Thai influence. Many Laotian MSM go to Thailand. Some men go to Pattaya to marvel at the scale and beauty of transgender shows; some sell sex; others, although far fewer, go to modify their bodies. Most return and, coupled with the rapid increase in the number of tourists coming into Laos, a gradual emergence of further alternatives to how one lives one’s sexuality are emerging. Thus, gay is becoming an appellate some men use. As gay carves out social space within the sexual landscape, \textit{kathoey} becomes slowly more definitively associated with overt transgenderism. We, thus, need to reflect these changes in terms of choices and associated characteristics but, to re-emphasise, the categories are not watertight.

**Continuums**

Sexual orientation relies on directionality: a person who desires another (as an object of their desire). This process entails the complex interplay of social and subjective assessments made in the course of deciding (or having decided for) who one finds attractive and/or desirable as a partner. In Laos, due to the lack of strong sanctions on the sex of one’s partner, there is a degree of flexibility in terms of partner choice. In this instance, it helps to think of these choices as framed by a range of sex/gender identity positions (Jackson, 1997). Men both fit themselves into and choose partners from different places on this continuum.

At one pole of a sex/gender range we would place ‘complete’ men (\textit{phu xai tem loi}), who primarily desire their sexual and gender opposite: women. The majority of Lao men would fit into this category. Taking a female partner is the means by which hetero-normative gender and sexuality is achieved. \textit{Kathoeys} fit at the other end of this hypothetical continuum. They are highly feminized and adopt a predominantly feminine sociability, seeking male partners for sex.
Importantly, any continuum has all positions in between its poles, and one can move up and down between positions. Men can be less or more ‘men’ just as they can be less or more kathoey. The presence of gay adds a further dimension to the more conventional explorations of male-male sexuality involving ‘full’ men and their kathoey partners (cf PSI, 2004 and Doussantousse, 2006). Gay in this context is more than just a word or a label. Placing ‘gay’ somewhere in the middle of the continuum between ‘full’ man and kathoey allows us to show how it impacts both on what it means to be a man and what it means to be a kathoey (non-man).

It is not just that more options are now available for (self-) positioning. It also means that men now have to think about what behaviours mean in different ways. As we will explain further, gay has taken on specific connotations. Most young urban people have heard the term even as there is no consensus on what it means. It is associated with new fashion familiarity, which is to say, to be hip one should have heard about or have some idea about the term gay simply because it is new and reflective of a large globalized understanding of sexuality. More importantly, even though its impact in sexual terms is still limited to pockets of men in urban centres, it is more broadly shaping ideas of sexual identity in ways that build on ideas of the body and sexual desire quite different from expressions of gay in other countries.

**Typologies**

At the same time, as we need a continuum to emphasize fluidity, we also need points along this continuum as a means of understanding the subject positions available to men. As Table 1 illustrates, programmes are based on a typology of overt physical characteristics. This is a table used by PSI in its study of MSM in Laos.

**Table 1: Typology of MSM Sub-groups in Lao PDR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-group</th>
<th>Identify as:</th>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Partners</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Sexual Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kathoey (MW)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Young men</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Perform oral sex, receive anal sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathoey (MM)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Young men</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Perform oral sex, receive anal sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MF</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
<td>Men (sometimes women also)</td>
<td>May perform and/or receive anal and/or oral sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay/bisexual</td>
<td>Male (gay)</td>
<td>Male (sometimes effeminate)</td>
<td>Men (sometimes women also)</td>
<td>Men (sometimes women also)</td>
<td>May perform and/or receive anal and/or oral sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners of Kathoey</td>
<td>Male (heterosexual)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kathoey, women</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Receive oral sex, perform anal sex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PSI 2004

In this breakdown, kathoey might either be heavily feminized (MW) to the point of constantly using female dress and language (and very occasionally transsexual surgery) or they might be kathoey who still maintain a more masculine appearance with shorter hair and male attire (MM). The table also shows the break between gay and kathoey (MM) is sometimes difficult to ascertain based on appearance alone, and is a product of identification in other ways. Some
kathoeys (MM), learning of the word gay, are unsure which label to use for themselves. We would place these ‘types’ on a continuum as follows:

Kathoe (MW) -------Kathoey (MM) -------Gay------‘Full’ Men (partners of kathoeys)

On this continuum, all the categories of men have sex with other men. This is the constant. Choice of partners is not random. Kathoeys (and many gay men) typically look for partners among ‘straight’ men. ‘Full’ men look for partners across the continuum (including with other ‘straight’ men, although this is less publicly acknowledged and for reasons we explore probably occurs less often than with gay or kathoey men). The range moves across forms of identification: from feminine to masculine. The full men who partner with kathoey regard themselves as masculine and heterosexual. We might see this group of partners as simply a sub-set of ‘straight’ males. Thus, the continuum is showing us the range of publicly displayed identification with homosexuality. On the right, the partners (‘real’ men or 100% ‘full’ men - phu xai tem loi) are not visibly associated with homosexuality at all, whereas the highly effeminate kathoeys are completely embedded in a sexualized identity.

The issue to emerge most strongly in our research is that men do not necessarily stay fixed in one or another of these boxes. These categories of identity and sexual practice are not discrete and formally-bounded entities – and it is the precise means by which movement between them is either promoted or hindered that sheds light on how sexuality is socially shaped and experienced. It is the chief goal of this report to uncover how men in these different categories come together in different ways and form different types of relationships. Sexual risk is perhaps the easiest thing to uncover. Data on condom use can be determined with a questionnaire. It has already been well established in Laos that risk for HIV transmission does take place in sexual relations between men (see Chapter 6). If we ask whether men feel at risk of HIV infection, the answer to this question is broadly, “not very.” The reasons are many. Outside of small targeted projects in Vientiane, programmes have not targeted male-male sex in any comprehensive fashion. Of course, most men are aware of HIV and its modes of transmission in the classic sex worker and drug user messages. Far fewer make this relevant to their own lives. This is most noticeable amongst the ‘full’ men (phu bao), who have not personalized a sense of risk with respect to male-male relationships. They have simply not been exposed to information that says HIV can be spread through male-male sex. This is also obvious in the lives of kathoeys and gay men. Overall, more than half the men we asked said they seldom used condoms. Nearly half said they often use them, but not always. Very few said they always used them. The question ‘why not’ takes longer to answer. The social grounding of risk and the broader context in which sexual interactions take place requires more detailed examination.

13 More recently, gay is becoming divided in some health programmes in two ways: gay king (insertive) and gay queen (receptive) that make the split between kathoey (MM) and gay queen even harder to distinguish. In further developments, the 2007 sero-surveillance survey replaced the kathoey (MM) and gay queen categories with the terms ‘effeminate gay’ and the full male with ‘bisexual’. While these newer forms of classification have analytic value and serve the political purpose of moving away from reliance on kathoey as the catch-all term for homo-erotic inclination, we have not adopted these terms as they are not yet part of local descriptions and understandings. Instead, we have sought to represent local usage and experience rather than derive newer taxonomic analytics.
People often comment these days in Laos that the number of kathoey and homosexually active men is increasing. It appears that Lao society is quietly accommodating this. Prior to the revolution, Vientiane was famous for its kathoey. One elderly Laotian kathoey described to us his astonishment when he first moved to Vientiane during the war years and saw literally “hundreds of long-haired and beautiful kathoey congregating around the fountain” waiting for Western partners in the centre of the small city. He told us of a Frenchman who picked him up and took him to a bar, where he was consigned to refill this gentleman's opium pipe in a small adjoining room before returning to his hotel for slow and somnolent sexual play. Since the revolution in 1975, the number of kathoey plummeted as they either left, hid their predilection for femininity or were sent to rehabilitation camps. Since the early 1990s, this trend has been in reverse. We might summarise the perceived increase as a product of several mutually-informing processes:

• **Higher media profile (usually emanating from Thailand), pornography (including homosexual) and fashionability of sexual demonstration** – This includes not just overt displays of femininity but also in the growing public acknowledgment amongst certain male peer cohorts that sleeping with other men is pleasurable and at times (economically) profitable. Being, or being seen with, a kathoey or gay man has become fashionable in some settings.

• **Increased influence of the market economy, in general, and in particular the market for male sex accompanying increased visits from Thai kathoey and Western and Thai gay men** - This is most prominent in Luang Prabang, where for the past 7-8 years there has been a noticeable increase of gay tourists (and until recently the home to the country's only gay bar). It is also evident in other tourist centres, where there is a growing market for kathoey to seek male partners. We might also include border areas close to Thailand, where Thai kathoey and gay men can visit local communities easily. A growing number of young men try male-male sex for the first time under the guise of economic need or experimentation.

• **Increased public visibility of Lao men** who in earlier years closer to the post-revolution period would have felt obliged to be more discrete in their public demonstration of femininity and/ or homoerotic desire - There are decreasing social sanctions against outward display and a growing recognition that male-male sex is prevalent in society worldwide.

• **As a combination of the preceding elements, a growing number of men explore either short- or long-term engagement with same-sex sexuality.** Increasing numbers of these men are comfortable with on-going public identification as gay or kathoey.

In short, both the visibility and the number of men happy to be visible in terms of preferred sexuality are increasing. Nobody knows how many men have sexual interactions with other men in Laos. Estimates are beginning to surface in the wake of growing interest in HIV infection amongst men with male partners. In working preparations for the 2006 Global Fund
submission, ballpark figures of up to 14,000 MSM throughout Laos were offered and, of these, it was estimated that roughly 4,000-5,000 actively identify as such and could thereby be reached through targeted campaign activities.\textsuperscript{14}

The difficulty in being more empirical, as flagged in the previous chapter, is of course the sheer diversity of contexts in which male-male sex takes place. A study of male sexuality in Vientiane in 2005 (Toole, 2005) showed nearly 20\% of men reported sexual behavior with other men at some point in their lives. Eight hundred young men were asked in a questionnaire how many times they had ever had sex leading to orgasm with another man. As Figure 1 shows, of the men surveyed, 18.5\% reported having had at least one such sexual experience.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure1.png}
\caption{Sample Survey of MSM Frequency}
\end{figure}

This particular study did not seek to disaggregate the men into degrees of self-identification with a sexualized social identity, ie. gay, \textit{kathoeys} or straight. It did seek to clarify whether those who reported sex with other men more than 5 times (4.6\%) were exclusively oriented to male partners in line with findings from other countries that signal between 3-5\% of all men prefer to have sex with men (i.e. a definitive sexual orientation). The report notes, however, that “All but one had a female sexual partner during the first six months of 2004, and 41.7\% (15/36) had two or more female sex partners during this period (range 2 -16). The report concludes from this data that, “It is therefore difficult to assume the sexual orientation of any of the men from an analysis of the behavioural survey.”

\\textsuperscript{14} Global fund activities that began in 2007 initially targeted 700 MSM in five provinces, in hopes of reaching 2,000 in the fifth year of activities. The programme officer of one NGO working with \textit{kathoey}s suggested estimates of 3000 MSM in Vientiane city and 800 in Luang Prabang, but acknowledged that accurate figures are impossible. Typically, estimates are much lower - although always vague (Vanphanom 2006:24) \textit{Kathoey}s and gay men in Luang Prabang, themselves, estimated that they constituted a group of about 100 -150 men who are open about their sexuality.
Our data also confirms extensive numbers of men who have had sexual experience with other men. Laos is an overwhelmingly rural society, and the demographic consequence of large numbers of young men moving into dormitories in or near towns and cities to further their education or to look for work creates a context where sex between men happens regularly. We asked many informants for rough estimates of how many men have sex with other men in these settings.

- The majority of estimates fell between the 30%-75% range for young men in dormitories all over the country to have tried sex with another male.
- One kathoey university student thought about it for some minutes. He commented that about 50% of young men in the dormitories would want to have sex with kathoey, but only about 20% would actually dare to do this.
- Another student (not identifying as gay or kathoey) told us that of ten of his friends, five have had sex with other men and, of these, about two do so regularly about 10 times per month. They had, in his words, become accustomed to getting money in this fashion.
- In every site we visited - Vientiane, Vang Vieng, Talaat and Luang Prabang - we heard estimates that around 40%-50% of young men/students in dormitories or villages were having sex with kathoey. In fact, in one place, the number of kathoey who would visit from elsewhere in search of partners had increased precisely as the town’s reputation as a tourist site had become more established, reinforcing the economic considerations involved in many MSM sexual relations.
- Figures were extremely high in some conversations. For example, in one locale, gay and kathoey informants figured as many as 90% of students in some dorms slept with other men. Some kathoeys described personal experience with this percentage of men in specific dorms.
- Sometimes the rationale varied slightly, sometimes the provenance varied – some said university students were more likely to engage in male-male sex because they were more daring and inclined towards curiosity to experiment; others said technical college students were poorer because they come from rural areas and, thereby, more likely to seek sexual relationships that might bring material support.

Our research did not make numerical assessments, and we must emphasise that we cannot validate the above estimates. They may well be exaggerations. Even without arriving at an exact figure, based on the data we collected, it would be impossible to dispute that a substantial number of men do have sex with men. There are dormitories all over Laos for young men who move to urban or provincial centres to study at vocational colleges or universities. They also house industrial workers or army recruits. For example, at least 2,500 young men reside in 14 male dormitories at a university in Vientiane. Hypothetically, if one takes the lower end of estimates, say 20%, this would mean that 500 men have (at least once) had sex with other men. If 5 in 10 is a generalisable figure, we would reach a total of more than 1,000.
Choosing Partners - First Sex in the Village

Men who take male partners is not simply an urban phenomenon. Rather, it is a practice that may be established in a rural setting and replayed in urban environments, including in dormitories across Laos. Many informants had been raised in rural areas. They described a relatively common practice of occasional sex between young men in their early teens and resident kathoeys in their village settings. The depiction of a young ‘straight’ male (phu bao) and a kathoey partner is the most typical image of homoeroticism throughout Laos, and this stereotype still informs much of the social structuring that shapes same-sex practice.

In most rural settings, male-male sex is regarded as both experimental and situational. Young men wish to try sex, or if they are already experienced with women, they wish to try something new and different (long khong paek). For instance, an 18-year-old kathoey student described key elements that underpin male-kathoey relationships in his home village:

In my province, kathoeys try to persuade young boys to have oral sex with them, but the boys do not have semen yet. But even 12-13-year-old boys like to tease and flirt with kathoey and want to sleep with kathoey. Here, kathoey with short or long hair have the same amount of partners because they tend to hang out as a gang. Young men in the village also congregate in groups, as well. At times, they meet up at festival events or parties, or just outside the village, and then they pair off for sex. One kathoey who owns a small restaurant will sometimes take sex instead of money for payment from young men who eat there. From what I can tell about 50% of young men in villages in this province sleep with kathoeys. - most of them just want to try sex before they sleep with girls. Overall, more boys lose their virginity with kathoey than they do with girls.

This depiction highlights the role played by kathoeys in socialising young men into sexual activity because of constraints on male-female sexual interaction in rural settings. Nearly all of our informants offered this explanation for commonplace male-male sex. To sleep with women is considered a precursor to an on-going relationship. This entails emotional and material support and commitment to a joint future. Sex with men is just sex (albeit more varied and exotic). Emotional investment in male-male relations is precluded for many reasons, an issue we will return to. F is a young man who lives near an army camp just outside the city. He has sex with other men whom he regards as friends:

I go with men and it’s just about sex, just about release. As soon as the sex is finished, its over (nam ook go laew); we don’t think of anything else. If I have sex with a woman, it is just the start of things. With men it doesn’t mean anything; with women it always does.

B, a student in Vientiane, observed: “It takes two to three days of courting to be able to have sex with a girl; it takes 30 minutes with a kathoey.”

These distinctions take place as a result of social traditions. In lowland Lao culture, it is still widely held that a young woman should not have sex before marriage. This is changing, as contemporary trends evolve to the point that many young men readily admit that they, themselves, are more likely to be seduced by young women than the reverse. As P, a student in Luang Prabang, puts it, “The young women are better at it than the guys these days. They all have casual lovers nowadays (phu ying gengkua phu xai, mii kik lai).” Nevertheless, throughout
Laos there remains a social model that defines premarital sexuality as a transgression for women and polices it by social sanction on the young woman's reputation and monetary fines for the apprehended male. A sexual interaction between a young man and a kathoey or other male is far more acceptable on a number of fronts:

- It allows the male to release sexual tension in ways regarded as devoid of any meaning\(^\text{15}\) (which it appears is, in fact, not the case).
- Sex with a kathoey or another man runs no risk of pregnancy and the social dilemmas/adjudications this would necessitate for the male (marriage or a fine).
- It doesn’t require the financial outlay that sex with a prostitute entails (and in most rural settings, kathoeys are more prevalent than casual sex workers (CSWs)).

In sum, phu bao-kathoey interactions protect normative female sexuality (marriageable daughters and sisters) at the same time that they validate male sexual experimentation. In addition, kathoeys are often given more freedom as teenagers by their parents as they are unlikely to get a woman pregnant, which allows them to develop a sexualized persona earlier in their adolescence. Thus, as we see in the vignettes, it is not uncommon in rural (and urban) settings for young men to have early sexual experiences with kathoeys. This feeds into forms of on-going sexual desire that are formatively age-structured. In most of our discussions with men who prefer other men sexually, there emerged a widespread preference for younger men, both in terms of physical appeal and also in terms of experience. A desirable partner is a young novice who might be ‘taught’ the ways of sex. It also allows a certain form of age-structured emotional appeal. The kathoey can be expected to ‘take-care’ of his younger charge. These patterns transfer with little change into urban settings.

As with so much of our data, generalities are difficult and village acceptance of men having sex with other men varies depending on the province in question. Several young men described their upbringing in the mountainous province of Xiang Khouang near Viet Nam, and mentioned they had never heard of, nor seen, kathoeys until they came to Vientiane. Others in provinces closer to Thailand cite commonplace presence of kathoeys in village communities, sometimes numbering up to 10 per village. In these circumstances, it is not just male sexual experimentation or pleasure that structures forms of social acceptance in rural settings. Another man, a teacher studying at a university, described forms of popular sociability in his home village:

Kathoeys are very openly accepted in Sayabouri. At wedding ceremonies, they will be the first to be invited, as they are considered as people who create good atmosphere (pu sangpanyagart). If people know that kathoeys are coming to a ceremony, they then think that it will be more fun – these parties are the most popular. Kathoeys take time for dressing up and turn up at the ceremonies late, but when they arrive, many people immediately come and join their table and there would be a lot of fun. Women often want to hang around with kathoey.

Southern districts in Sayabouri have many kathoey. I think it is because they border Thailand. There are many people crossing to Thailand and there are Thai kathoey coming over often. This makes local kathoey who have not opened themselves become confident

\(^{15}\) Like many cultures, Laotians regard male sexuality as a drive that is damaging to repress and that requires hydraulic release in appropriate fashion. This takes on particular relevance when we discuss localised narratives of understanding of same-sex desire and the associated morphology of transgender practice.
to express themselves. In Sayabouri, there is one kathoey who got married with a village man. They killed a buffalo and a cow. There are old kathoey, as well. Some of them support young boys, paying for school fees. The boys’ parents are aware of this, but they do nothing.

At the same time, as some kathoeys remain in or return to their home villages, cities are becoming magnets for men looking for greater anonymity or broader social networks. In part, this is to seek greater employment opportunities and enter a greater pool of partners; it is also a response to prejudice in small communities. While oftentimes subtle, we cannot underplay the on-going role of social discrimination in the ways it shapes identity and choices for men who prefer sex with other men.

**Stigma: Coming Out as Kathoey**

At times, stigma appears in explanations for general bad luck where kathoeys are to blame for everything. In Luang Prabang, we learned from several informants that older generations blame environmental and social misfortune on the growing presence of kathoeys. For instance, S told us that he had heard friends of his parents complain that everything was now so expensive because there were so many kathoeys - not from the consumerism they represent, but because traditions have been broken. In a similar vein, X told us that his grandparents believe the prevalence of kathoeys in Luang Prabang had led to inadequate rainfall and subsequent crop failure because kathoeys were an unnatural presence. Thus, everything had become more expensive. Such general disdain and fear readily transmits within interpersonal relations, most typically within the family, where scorn mixes with affection in various ways.

Many of the men we spoke with indicated that they were aware at an early age of feeling different than brothers or male peers. This difference was typically framed through the appeal of sister’s, mother’s or female friend’s clothes, chores, toys and/or company. Sometimes parents encourage this demonstration of ‘difference’. Many men described a maternal accommodation of having another ‘daughter’ in the family, wherein gravitation to female accoutrements and roles was seen as something quite acceptable. These days, according to many informants, there is far less circumspection than in the past, and local schools and village communities are often the first place kathoeys make obvious a degree of femininity. As P observes:

> I have been kathoey since I was young. My parents brought me girl’s dresses, pink dresses. There was no daughter in my family. My parents really wanted a daughter, so they were happy to raise me as girl. I only did house work, like girls. I was not told to do heavy work as other boys; it was partly because I am a small person.

But others also described resigned accommodation:

> I am 21 years old, from K village. I work in a beauty salon. I live with my parents. My parents are not happy for me to be a kathoey, but they kind of gave up hassling me, being tired of telling me to change. When I was 14 years old, my dad hit me on the face for being kathoey. Now they just sort of accept it.
Such outright hostility (usually from fathers and brothers) is not uncommon – sometimes active interventions are enlisted in the attempt to re-instill some supposed lost or declining masculinity. Often people see homosexuality as a disease to be cured, an illness from which the individual can be rehabilitated. Interventions might be environmental: W’s father took him on one of his regular work trips to remote rural sites for several months, where he oversaw the construction of bridges in the hope that being around the physicality of laborers and the sociality of work gangs might reinvigorate his son’s sense of appropriate maleness. It didn’t work. Interventions might also be nutritional: S’s father tried to get him to drink a type of local herbal whiskey (Lao dong), thought to improve virility, in the hope it would diminish his preference for other men. It, too, didn’t work. Or they might be patently dismissive. T’s parents kicked him out of home at the age of 13 for continually raiding his mother’s wardrobe, with the threat that if he stayed he had to behave like a man; if not, dad would ‘kill him’. T left for Vientiane the day after his father hit him in one particularly violent argument.

In other circumstances, it is more complicated because prejudice is mitigated by money or appearance, as L notes:

When I was young, I was beaten up by my brother. He did not want me to be gay. I studied until secondary school, before moving to Thailand to stay with my father in Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, to avoid the problems with my family here. Nowadays, everyone knows that I am gay, including my parents, but they do not say anything, as I am the one who supports the family with money from my (foreign) boyfriend.

B’s sister, who is somewhat worldly-wise, encourages him to be gay rather than kathoey. She feels the stigma won’t be so great from neighbours and relatives (du diikua, bo mii pamat), and that they will have less burden of shame due to the less obvious outward display of femininity and the perception that ‘gay’ is less definitively non-heterosexual than kathoey. At other times, men internalize the stigma and try to change. U tells us of his personal distress:

I have been gay since I was young, preferring to hang out with girls rather than boys. I liked looking at boy’s genitals. When I was in Grade 5, my friends would not let me play with them because of me being kathoey. Then I tried to improve myself and stop behaving like a girl; I did this by playing more sports. My parents know that I am kathoey but want me to stop. Dad often told me that women belong with men. Men can not be paired with men. Dad wanted me to change my behaviour, to stop acting like a girl. As I became more aware that I am gay, I kept trying to change, to be more active, to play sports, try to be male. When I was 19-20 years old, I went to Vangvieng to sell books. Then I would cut myself on the arm with a knife as punishment whenever I had sexual desire and sometimes tried to kill myself by slicing my veins, but I could not cut deeply enough. God saves me.

And we did hear one story of a suicide based on impossible love. P told us of an event back in his home village:

There was a man who liked the sister of a local kathoey J. Unfortunately, the parents of the young woman asked for a large brideprice (kha sin sod) that the prospective groom could not afford, so the wedding was cancelled. Next the family matched the man with another young woman. This time it was J’s cousin. The man came up with the brideprice (less in this instance), but over the course of the engagement began to fall in love with J instead.
The man knew that if he decided not to marry the girl, he would be fined. So the young man and his kathoey love tried to flee. They told all their friends that they would commit suicide, but no one took it seriously. Not long later, J and his lover hanged themselves in one of the little huts in the rice field.

But, despite such descriptions, stories of our informant’s accommodation and acceptance from families outweighed overt and hostile rejection. One assumes Lao society has always been somewhat accepting of non-normative sexuality based on the historic presence and entrenched social roles of kathoey. After the 1975 government takeover, displays of sexual hedonism were prohibited. This is changing dramatically these days, as modernizing Laos embraces many trends linked to increased consumerism and individual display. Like so many variables linked to the social acceptance of sexuality, there is no neat categorization of either/or. Many of our informants, nonetheless, indicated that in the next life, given the choice, they would prefer to be either a man (preferable) or a woman (acceptable) rather than caught between neither one nor the other. A few said that they would be happy to be reborn as kathoey, seeing positives rather than difficulties.

In most societies, homoeroticism is non-normative and, thus, marginal. To be marginal is to be unable to negotiate one’s own place in the world on an even footing with others. In addition to overt discrimination, there are other subtle processes that prefigure or privilege certain expressions of male-male relations. We, therefore, turn to conventional structuring elements of society (such as age, class, occupation, gender and race). Subsequently, we move to more intrinsically internal characteristics such as love, pleasure, and desire, and examine how they are all embodied in the experiences of men who love, use or abuse other men in the course of developing sexual relations.
Chapter 3

Engagement Rules - Age, Money and Workplace

Social factors shape sexual experiences in particular ways. Some are more obvious than others. Together they tell us how certain relations take place and how men take on certain identities that, in turn, shape their experiences. They also determine to what extent risk of HIV transmission is potentially part of these interactions. This chapter looks at the more overt factors that structure male-male sexuality. In the next chapter, we will consider what happens when these elements are internalized and how social conditioning determines key characteristics of male-male sex in Laos.

Age and Its Importance

Men become sexually active with other men at various ages. For some, it is a gradual process occurring after sex with a female partner. For many, it comes with another male at an early age. Amongst the 93 men with whom we spoke, nearly 70 told us details about their first male-male sexual experience. Roughly a third of the sexually active men had sexual relations with another male when they were under the age of 15, some as young as 9 (see Annex 3, p. 95). Sometimes this was in a group of school peers; other times it was at the invitation (usually unsolicited and sometimes unwanted) of an older man: an older brother’s friend; an uncle or older associate of the family, an anonymous man and so forth. For example, B told us:

My parents ran a small furniture factory and many visitors and laborers would sleep in the house with me and my siblings. From about the age of 10 onwards, I remember laborers sometimes touching me in the night. By the age of 13-14, I began to give oral sex to some of these men.

What is striking in the details the men gave us is that when sexual interactions took place at a very early age they made little indication that it was traumatic. Rather, a number of men relayed stories of initial shock at physical overtures and contact, but little sense of violation or abuse. Of course, these are stories told many years later, and negative associations may be selectively avoided. The reactions might also be a product of the absolute dearth of any help or counseling in situations of abuse. The way the narratives were relayed also feeds into the prevalent (self-reproducing) idea that kathoeys are sexually precocious, even at an early age. A number of men regarded their own sexual inclination as becoming obvious to themselves at a young age, and that initial experiences were exciting demonstrations of this. Others felt that this early experience ushered in a life of homoerotic preference in a more formative sense. In any event, early sexual interactions raise serious issues of HIV risk based on inexperience and lack of ability to negotiate how, in fact, the sexual encounter takes place.

This trend of youthful sexuality is also generalized amongst wider cohorts of young men these days. Some informants described young men/boys becoming sexually active at an increasingly young age, to the extent that by 13 or 14 years of age more than a few youngsters within school peer groups are having sexual experiences. This sets the stage for interactions with other males.
as first sexual encounters based on a lesser availability of female partners at that age. One older gay man in Vientiane told us: “In Laos, sexuality is very fluid. If you can’t eat rice, you eat bread.” Others explain their desire for young men as based on the increasing number of young kathoey men. As K, who is 30, observes:

When I first came out, I was one of only about 10 kathoey in my city. Older kathoey took me to watch, and taught me how to do it. Now it is so much fun. There are more than 100 kathoey here, and each year there is a new wave of young men (ruun mai) reaching puberty who might be kathoey. I have to try them all.

The typical description of kathoey as the first option for sex for most males is somewhat countered these days by the fact that young women are becoming increasingly sexually available. As A notes, “Sex happens a lot these days – it is something completely normal (‘nam ook pen ruang tamadaa’); women are much more open than they used to be.” Being fashionable, coupled with the widespread availability of pornographic movies, is central in this trend of young people becoming sexually active at younger ages. It is also used by informants to explain a growing number of young men displaying their preference for other men within school-age peer groups.

It must also be noted, however, that not all men’s initial sexual experiences with other men were mutually enjoyed. Several men described being raped the first time they experienced sex with another man. N is in his mid 20s and is still grappling with how to tell his family of his preference for other men:

I lost my virginity when I was a young student. I was working with a company, the boss asked me to come upstairs, to give him a hand. He had given me more money than the others in my pay packet so I knew he liked me. He grabbed me and was touching and kissing me all over. It ended with anal sex. I was embarrassed and resisted, but I could not scream and ask for help because there were staff downstairs and I am too shy. He raped me. After that time, I had sex (sia tua) with the boss often. I was patient, as I wanted to get a full months salary. Then I resigned.

N elaborated that the lack of open discussion of male-male sexual desire in Laos provides the perfect stage for abuse. He told us that older men can use various forms of social power to exploit young men. It might be, as in the above case, threat of job security. It might also be linked simply to the ability of older men to threaten and control younger men based on social status. N’s point was that older men in Laos are unlikely to be open about preferring men sexually, marrying and raising a family while still relying on clandestine liaisons with men – often in the form of abuse of much younger men whom they can coerce into sexual relations. Many of our informants described their first sex as involuntary, with the implication that they did not know what was about to take place (see also K’s story in Annex 3, p. 103).

Thus, age isn’t only an issue in terms of first experience. Age also profoundly determines the way relationships take place, notions of desirable partners, and how power and status are employed. In Laos, age dictates how people relate socially with each. Speaking generally, close friendship is only possible with one’s immediate peer group. Lind van Wijngaarden (1999) notes that younger Thai male sex workers accept that age-based social subordination can at times entail the provision of sex to those with more power (older men). These men do not necessarily
feel their heterosexuality has been compromised; rather, that they are responding in socially inscribed ways over which they have no choice. Put more cynically, one is exploited sexually by those older until one is old enough to take advantage of those younger than oneself - although it is seldom as entirely one-sided as this sounds. It is widely held in Laos that older men have to pay for sex: on the one hand, this is recognition of status and, on the other hand, they have to because they are generally deemed less desirable partners. J, a 20-year-old kathoey student, comments succinctly, “I have sex as much as I can now because I know when I am 30 I won’t be able to get much – I won’t have the money.”

It is notable in present-day Laos that one sees very few older kathoeys. This is a product of two elements. Firstly, social and political control is only recently lessening after the post-revolution purity campaigns - many older men still maintain high levels of discretion over their preference for male sex. Secondly, marriage and the notion of family is a hugely powerful institution in Laos, and many men who might be sexually active with other men in their teens and early twenties take a wife and raise a family by the time they are in their later twenties. This is not to say all give up relations with other men. Rather, relationships become even more hidden, as older men seek out younger single partners. To do so, they engage the required structure of economic exchange. Older men pay for sex; younger men receive payment. The reverse is socially unacceptable between Lao men. Taken together, this creates a means by which social forms can be reproduced within these sexual relations. Young men are taken care of in ways that reproduce social and kin-based responsibility within a framework of sexual exchange.

Thus, numerous young men (primarily students) receive payment for sex from older men or kathoeys. This is rationalized in two ways: younger men need material support, they are not yet of working age. Secondly, younger men are more desirable in terms of physical appeal and in terms of sexual ‘innocence’. For instance, F is a 25-year-old kathoey who told us that he prefers “young students whose bodies are still soft and who don’t yet have course moustaches.” So while most gay men or kathoeys prefer men who are younger or their same age for sexual partners based on aesthetic or erotic appeal, there is also a pragmatic reality that to sleep with an older partner can be undertaken for economic gain. Or at other times, men sometimes prefer to sleep with older men not in order to gain money, per se, but to avoid the necessity or pressure to pay younger men. For men of roughly the same age, material exchange is determined by other factors that we will describe shortly. In all instances, age is seldom an irrelevant variable. Indeed, it strongly feeds into erotic desire and its material accompaniments.

**Economics**

Economic exchange plays a large role in structuring male-male relationships. It is not the only factor, nor always the most important, but its influence cannot be ignored. The first and most obvious facet is the extent to which exchange of money or other material goods accompany male-male sexual relationships. It is seldom considered as commercial sex due to the range of other social and emotional elements that shape the relationship, although occasionally this term will be used (we did go to one bar where ‘full’ men were employed as sex workers to sell on-site services to other men – an indication of how, as in much of the trends we are describing, capitalism and modernity inevitably play their part in the changing options for sexual identity and practice). Yet, cash exchange is not anywhere near as uniform as the situation described
in Cambodia, where long-haired MSM are most often paid for sex (see Morineau et al, 2004). Nor is it the same as the commercial sex venues we encounter in Thailand. In Laos, in notable contrast to its neighbours, it is most commonly *kathoey* who pay young men for their sexual company.

Thus, the most common (and stereotyped) occurrence of male-male sex in Laos is the transient (often one time only) relationship between a *kathoey* and his/her male partner. In this example, a *kathoey* will actively seek out the sexual company of a lad (*phu bao*) - very often a student. This could happen at any one of numerous drinking/dancing venues. Discos are the most common locale, but drinking venues and restaurants are also widely recognised as meeting places. On other occasions, a *kathoey* might frequent locales where students congregate, for instance, student cafeterias or in actual dorms, but this is less common. Alternatively, some young men in need of money know they can receive payment from a willing *kathoey* or gay man and will in turn seek them out. The students and other young men will have sex for money for a number of reasons - if they haven't been sent enough by their parents (to pay for school fees or social life), they want to buy things to be cool, or to support a relationship with their girlfriends. It's hard to find part-time work.

Typical descriptions highlight the *kathoey* as the seducer, - vivacious conversation, physical proximity and suggestive caress, plus direct offer of financial assistance. The latter need not be straight cash exchange; it might begin more subtly with the query as to whether the young male owns a mobile phone or whether he needs a top-up on his phone account. Sometimes, money is not mentioned prior to sex taking place. The young man will visit the *kathoey* and ask for new clothes, beer, money and so on the day after. As G, a 31-year-old *kathoey* in a smaller town, observes:

> I am so bored with finding a sex partner. Young guys only want money. There is no way they will look at you without this. Then they take it and just spend it on their girlfriends. They just lie to you.

K, a 24-year-old, talked of his sexual contacts: “If we don’t give them [students] money, they will not come to us.” P, who resides in the countryside, further noted:

> The guys around here chase money less than they do in Vientiane city. But you still need cash or drugs to get them. Here, one pill will do. Young men want money from the moment they hit puberty these days. In the past, they waited until they had a job before they would think about sex and relationships. Now it all starts much earlier. Sex and money go together; guys want cash, so they can buy things and have girlfriends. In the countryside, some things are more relaxed. I can have sex with older men, people I know (often married) and money is not involved. In Vientiane, the older you are the more you pay.

Most *kathoey* (and many gay men) are resigned to the fact that they will nearly always pay for sexual contacts with younger men; they are both bored and annoyed, but at the same time cannot imagine any alternative. Others see it as a challenge – to seduce men without having to pay - and some succeed. They tell us that there are occasions when sexual desire, exoticism and/or experimentation are adequate reasons for young men to acquiesce. But, by and large, *kathoey*, gay men and their ‘masculine’ partners told us that money is nearly always at the heart of the relations. Several *kathoey*, explaining their desire for Lao rather than foreign partners,
described themselves as consumers of Lao products (*boripoke khong Lao*). While a glib catchphrase, it also underlines the degree to which market metaphors provide a central framework through which sexual relations are enacted. In this instance, the *kathoey* is the purchaser; the Lao lad the product for consumption. In reality, there is much more to the relationship than money, a subject we will return to in the next chapter.

It is hard to put a firm figure on the amount of money. Sometimes buying dinner and drinks is enough; sometimes it runs much higher (mobile phones can cost hundreds of dollars). It depends on the personality and enthusiasm of the people involved. The average figure we heard was somewhere between 30,000 - 50,000 kip (USD 3-5). Some ‘full’ men told us they could make between 100,000 -200,000 for sex with a *kathoey*. Virtually all *kathoeys* we spoke with denied they would ever pay this much. In areas outside of Vientiane and the larger cities, the emphasis on money declines, and issues of experimentation take greater precedence. We heard of cigarettes being ample exchange in more remote areas.

### Significance Behind the Money

More important than exactly how much money is exchanged is the way economics creates particular assumptions and expectations about male-male sex:

1. It establishes the idea that poorer men can gain money through sexual interaction. Importantly, not all poor men as a class, but young men temporarily without access to adequate wages, eg. students and young men without good jobs. The need for money provides an ostensible justificatory logic for certain young men to be having sex with other men that doesn't require or make prominent homoerotic desire. Because it happens fleetingly and casually, it is not seen as commercial sex. Instead, it is associated with the material immaturity of youth who are not yet able to make an adequate living.

2. It further establishes the idea that the *kathoey* (or gay man) is purchasing something from the young men that is desirable (youth/masculinity). This, in turn, becomes something of value to ‘gain’ for the *kathoey*. The local language always uses the phrase the man ‘loses himself’ (*sia tua*) in the exchange with the *kathoey*, rather than the fact he gains money. The men say they need to get something back to compensate for the loss (of semen *sia nam* but also the fact he has been possessed/conquered *sia piap* - loss of face - *sia naa* and possible regret - *sia jai*). A *kathoey* obtains something more important than the forfeited money: a fleeting sense of dominance in a world that typically denies the *kathoey* social respect.

3. It privileges the notion that sexual desire is one-way and that 'straight' men are doing it for material gain, rather than for sexual pleasure. The *kathoey* or gay man, on the other hand, is supposedly responding to innate sexual needs. All that is at stake in this relationship for the *kathoey* is sexual contact, possession and pleasure. While sexual satisfaction is clearly implicated for the young men, it is portrayed as more about release, rather than active desire, and it takes secondary place to the masculine traits of experimentation and income.

It must be noted that not all relations fit this model. Many men engage same-sex relations where financial considerations do not factor in the same way. There are instances where *kathoeys* will seek not to have money be part of the exchange, and at times they are able to negotiate this outcome. There are situations where young men still at school or university have
relations with their friends or peers when money is not part of the picture. What academics call ‘situational sex’ also occurs in such locations as prisons, military camps and temples without any form of material exchange. As a growing number of self-identifying gay men champion the right to multiple partners (much as in the West), this can increasingly take place between Laotian men without financial exchange.

At other times, the financial exchange doesn’t follow the young man-kathoey model as described above. This is where age re-enters the equation. Older homo-erotically inclined men who have taken a wife in accommodation of the predominant way of growing old in Laos will still periodically seek a male partner, often preferring more feminine kathoey than masculine phu bao. In these cases, the older men invariably pay. N, a kathoey student from a rural area, told us he received 2,000 baht (500,000 kip) each time an older Laotian married man visited him, approximately every month. P, another man in a provincial town, told us that when he was in his 20’s, he had been sent to Thailand by an older married bank-manager after his wife and children had discovered their affair. He had been set up in a plush apartment in Phuket for a number of years to avoid any scandal. Western or other non-Laotian will sometimes pay substantial amounts to maintain an on-going relationship. In other cases, older Laotian men told us that some young gay men prefer them over Western men as sexual partners because Asian styles of emotional patronage that are implied in an age structured relationship compensated for lesser material support.

In either case, a kathoey in his late teens or twenties can make money from older men and spend money with younger men or those of a similar age. Typically, they can make more money from fewer older partners and spend it with a larger number of younger men. Likewise, effeminate (tung ting) and non-effeminate gay men will sometimes sleep with ‘real’ men – this might involve money, or it might involve a certain appeal for sexual variety wherein money is not required. This returns us to the continuum we mentioned in the previous chapter. For some ‘straight’ men, experimentation and on-going sexual relations with gay men or kathoey brings suggestions that they, themselves, might be gay. It promotes mobility along the continuum in complicated ways (that we explore in the next chapter) for it is generally assumed that a growing number of sexual interactions can gradually undermine one’s status as 100% male, although this is neither immediate nor automatic. As mentioned, most ‘full’ men surveyed will enjoy insertive anal sex, but will only allow oral sex for money because they fear that they are getting too ‘close’ to kathoey. Others (including women) proclaim that maximizing partners of both sexes only reinforces a man’s innate sexual prowess.

Social Cost of Taking Money for Sex

So precisely what is at stake for ‘full’ men to have sex with other men? B, a 19-year-old student in Vientiane, listed reasons why he feels uneasy having sex with kathoey – he has done so, but only once in his life. Many of his friends continually do so. His comments reflect ideas we heard from other phu bao in our research:

16 Overall in our sample, 28 kathoey and gay men indicated they received more then they spent on sex; 33 indicated they spend more than they make.
• He is worried that *kathoeys* will become obsessed with him. He has seen how they will follow certain men around, observing “they become too fussy, always clinging to you. They can taunt us in public, reminding others of their sexual relations with us.”

• “I am scared of AIDS.”

• “I am scared of not growing strong; they take too much out of you, you lose your source of strength [semen].”

• “I am scared of getting used to a life with a *kathoeys*. Of liking the access to money they offer, of losing self-discipline and becoming a slovenly lay-about (*mak ngai*), and becoming used to sex and money and the lifestyle that goes with it (*tit nixai*).”

Both men and women felt that obtaining money from sex was the overriding negative that accompanied student-*kathoeys* relationships. We heard a number of times that the male who sleeps with *kathoeys* becomes less desirable as a partner for a woman, or less respectable as an upright male - not because of non-heterosexual behaviour, but because he is getting money this way, “because he is lazy.” It was not only women that forwarded this interpretation. Other men, like B, felt it demonstrated a slovenly and careless attitude to financial livelihood, and they would advise their friends against too much male-male sex because they said that it could become like an occupation (*axiip*), demonstrating a fundamental character deficiency linked to finding gainful support: ‘he has no drive, has no motivation to seek proper work’ (*bo mii panyaan*). This would indicate that for many people, sex with other men is not seen as strongly deviant in sexual terms, and both men and women suggested the man had ‘nothing to lose’. Rather, according to our informants, it is the economic nature of the exchange that is seen as unmanly.

Interestingly, the reverse also holds to some degree. For their part, *kathoeys* are begrudgingly given respect for the fact they can always afford to pay. Overall, this does little to elevate their social status, but we cannot discount it either. *Kathoeys* (and by extension gay men who in many peoples’ eyes are one and the same) are credited widely with being highly skilled individuals. While not related to spiritual power as in some societies, there is nonetheless a sense that *kathoeys* are resilient individuals, possessed of heightened social and practical skills made most evident in their ability to keep paying young men for company. P told us, “Because we have money means they can't criticise us so much.” The social order gives with one hand even as it takes with the other.

### Workplace Constraints and Situational Opportunities

Despite this seeming ability to do well financially, *kathoeys* who are overtly feminine tell us there exist constraints on the types of work they can access. Beauty shops are the most common occupations, offering social comfort and expectation of respected skills associated with beauty work. At times, entry into this occupation has been directed by discrimination. Some informants from areas outside of Vientiane told us that when they were younger, they had been ridiculed at school because of their feminine mannerisms and way of speaking. Working in a beauty shop is one of the few options available to an early school leaver. As an example, J notes that in his hometown:
Kathoey often leave school early. They leave before they finish secondary school because they want to work, get jobs. In school, people often pick on them. This is partly why kathoey do not continue schooling. After leaving school, they try to earn money, being hairdressers, selling in the market, some even sell drugs [amphetamines].

Most young men told us that these days discrimination was lessening and they received little hostile attention at school, instead finding solidarity with other young men who were becoming aware of their sexuality both in terms of ‘straight’ partners looking for sexual contact and other kathoey or gay peers. Other service industries, such as restaurants and hotels, are alternative sources of work for ‘effeminate’ men, although some men indicated they had been turned down in their job searches in restaurants and hotels based on their appearance. When asked about agents supplying connections between tourists and local sex partners, a few suggested that they did exist and they would help make contact and assist in language difficulties. But more commonly we heard that there is no need for any formal sort of agent/pimp service. Instead many men told us that most guesthouses or hotels have staff who are gay/kathoey, and these men can easily effect connections (possibly with themselves).

Government service is more complicated. Overt kathoey seldom work for government. Men who are discrete about their sexuality do, although there are some exceptions. One village head in the city (where a village is a level of local administration) is openly gay and he says this has posed no hindrance in his career. Despite such candour, he didn’t want to meet us in a public setting. Young kathoey/gay men working for government told us they intended to marry in order to be eligible for promotion. While this is not a statutory requirement, nor a stipulation based on sexual discrimination, men felt that the stability a marriage represented was taken into consideration when promotion was imminent. To be single is regarded as too footloose. One teacher we talked with was open about his sexuality and the fact that he had been transferred from teaching at a secondary school (where students range in age from 14 to 20 years of age) to a primary school because of his sexual predilection. He told us he had slept with about 40 young men in the school dorm before he was moved. Other teachers told us they would never have sex with men at the school where they taught. But older students in other schools were fair game. We also heard stories of teachers awarding higher grades in exchange for sex. Male students would sometimes capitalize on their recognized sexual appeal to older gay/kathoey men in order to get better marks. How true these stories are is hard to tell, but it highlights that sexual practice takes place in various forms, many of which are predicated on the notion that male-male sex is widespread and orchestrated through conventional social hierarchies.

One informant spent more than two years in military school. He was adamant his time in the army was ‘heaven’ and he suffered no direct derision. He didn’t act effeminately, but he said men knew and some would take time to seek out his company and sexual favours. In his barracks, he slept with 4 of the 13 men in his dorm, and numerous others from outside his dorm. Likewise, D told us of his early years when he grew up near an army camp and described the frequent attention he received in the evenings and weekends. He was young and did not identify as a kathoey, but he described the commonplace intimacy between men, being physically close and sharing drinks and company that often led to sexual relations.
Physical proximity is a big factor in facilitating male-male sexual activity. We have mentioned that schools, factories, private and government work sites all house large numbers of men in dormitories. Many of our informants described the most commonplace arena for male-male sexuality originates in these dorm environments, where male proximity and lack of female company leads to male sexual experimentation or desire for a kathoey or other male partner. In a factory dorm, M recounted how he/she had slept with a different male every night. The man would just position himself next to him “to be my husband for the night”. After about a year, she became unable to cope with the constant attention and left.

D, a 20-year-old student (kathoey) from a provincial town, told us:

I have slept with about 20 young men in the dorm where I stay in Vientiane (it has 200 young men) and I would say roughly 50% of men in this dorm have had sex with other men. I used to have sex with about 4 different men a month, but now I do it less. I am sick of the gossip and don’t want to constantly encounter those I have had sex with. Nowadays, I can’t use the dorm bathrooms on my own – I always get hassled (touched and grabbed); I go to bathe in groups with other kathoeys. It is easy to tell which men want to have sex by the way they joke with me. It is easy to do it in the dorms: you just sit on the guys lap and put a blanket over you – in the lower bunks noone notices.

Temples are another context where male-male sex takes place. Although not normally spoken about, most men we talked with were aware it happens. A number of them described visits to temples and the sexual trysts that take place with monks (tango). Some men felt this breached no religious sanction as they felt that male-female sex was prohibited under celibacy rules, but that male-male eroticism was not. Others felt it was indeed against religious codes but common nonetheless. We see it in the details provided in some of the stories in the annex.

Thus, occupational and situational issues play their part in the opportunities for lifestyle, income and sexual relations among men who are openly gay or kathoey. We mentioned earlier the age and power nexus that allows some older men to take advantage of younger men in workplace situations. The workplace also provides more advantageous connotations: it is widely recognised that kathoeys are adept at getting money through refined social and manual skills. This ability to make money, coupled with recognized cultural sophistication and sexual prowess, is an important element of their appeal to younger men. Many ‘full’ men felt kathoeys could overwhelm young men very easily because they had so much money and social finesse. They were somewhat in awe of them. This leads to a consideration of how other variables build off of the connotations attributed to the different types of men coming together. In the next chapter, we look at how men internalize notions of appropriate masculinity and femininity, and explore how deeply embedded fear and desire play themselves out in complicated permutations of gendered roles and embodied characteristics.
Nam Phu Fountain is historically famous for flirting and, perhaps, finding kathoey and other male partners.
Chapter 4

Bodies and Emotions
Integrating Fear and Desire

Men have sex with other men in various circumstances and with various understandings about what the relationship entails. Money, pleasure and desire for emotional and physical intimacy are central elements. These entailments are not gained automatically. They emerge from specific understandings about what sex between men means and what practices it requires. Thus, meanings and practices cannot be separated. The point is that social conditioning creates certain forms of relationships by governing the choices available to men in terms of finding partners. It also dictates bodily pleasures, experiences and, in turn, subjective feelings. How men feel about their relationships is a crucial determinant of safe sex uptake. At its most basic, how two people perceive their relationship will be a key determinant of whether HIV risk is also present. Knowledge, trust, awareness, and concern are essential to on-going safe sex practice. These components are not just present or absent - they are products of the type of relationships that take place and the type of subject positions available to men who engage in these relationships. In Laos, social narratives surrounding male sexuality become embodied in very specific ways.

Gender and Embodiment

Gender concepts structure male-male sexual relations profoundly in Laos (as anywhere). Even though there are ample examples of ‘straight’ men ‘fooling around’ with their friends, as mentioned, the most common stereotype of male homo-eroticism occurs between one partner (kathoey) who is open about his desire for men, and another partner, a ‘full’ male (phu bao) who feels his masculinity is not affected by sexual relations with a kathoey. A phu bao’s sexual engagement is most typically explained by the need for money and for sexual release. Most informants from the range of different males we spoke with (and also from women) observed that the lad (phu bao) has little or nothing to lose (sia) in the relationship. In actual fact, when this dynamic is considered more closely, it is neither so simple nor straightforward.

Most ‘full’ men recognise that sexual pleasure is an integral part of the relationship, even as they take some care to be discrete. They are scared of the social embarrassment that could result if anyone beyond their closest male friends knows of their relations with other men. They are particularly careful not to let their girlfriends know because most assume that women do not accept it. Curiously, there is no consensus from women on this issue. Several told us that if they had to choose, they would rather their boyfriends slept with another male than with another woman, as a guy had ‘nothing to lose’ (bo day sia nyang) by sleeping with another male. Other women felt the opposite – they would reject him as a boyfriend or a husband because the behavior put an intrinsic sense of heterosexual masculinity at risk; that if a man were to sleep with another man, he would be less of a male. Either way, young male partners of kathoeys who do not see themselves as effeminate will not personally feel they are themselves
jeopardizing their masculinity, so long as few others know about the excursions into same-sex relations. This view is changing, however, as notions of gender and bodily responses to sexual pleasure become less typecast.

In most perceptions, to be a kathoey means exclusive sexual desire for men (often, but not always, exhibited by prominent femininity). Any man could have sex with another man and remain a ‘man’ so long as he doesn’t demonstrate the above characteristics. Implicit in this positioning are certain requisite sexual scripts – the male would be the one with the erection and the orgasm. The kathoey is the one who services his partner’s sexual arousal and satisfaction. This is not to say that sexual pleasure is not important to the kathoey; simply, that it can not (or should not) be demonstrated physically through mutual genital stimulation. The idealised kathoey in popular perceptions should not get erections. To do so indicates a still functioning form of masculinity, and this troubles the supposed overwhelming femininity that is meant to characterise the kathoey as praphet thi song (second type of woman).

Of course, there are many who do not conform to this model – they say such talk is rubbish and relish the sexual pleasure that physical excitement entails. But many, perhaps the majority we spoke with, still adhere to this notion to some extent and try to suppress, hide or deny physical arousal. Importantly, the reverse perception also holds - men who sleep with other men in the active and insertive role are not feminized. They remain men and feel secure in this knowledge through the active demonstration of malehood – an erection. Even more significantly, even as this narrative is widely upheld, masculinity is never one-dimensional and there are significant alternative subject positions and gender reversals that stem from this particular belief. The politics of sexual arousal has many implications in how relationships are enacted and experienced.

**Sexual Attraction and Gender Reversal**

Many phu bao suggested that they prefer to sleep with an individual kathoey only once because to do so more than this is to court trouble both in terms of overt attention from friends and further advances from the kathoey. They are seemingly highly conscious of avoiding an on-going relation with a kathoey, which would elevate the dynamic beyond the casual (economic) nature. Interestingly, many kathoeys similarly suggested that a majority of their relations with men will only happen once. This was a product of avoidance behaviour from both parties, who described total refusal to acknowledge each other when crossing paths during the days after having had sex. Other kathoeys observed that they didn’t want to promote on-going attraction because this could encourage male peers to fight for the kathoey’s attention. T notes: “He/she will only sleep with phu bao once because of the jealousy it causes if other men see that he is devoting so much attention to this one male.”

Because on-going intimacy is confined to male-female relations, male-male relationships are strongly structured around an ethos of sexual conquest. Once this is achieved, a new partner is sought. It sets up the idea that sexual relations are inherently temporary and need to be constantly chased, creating an impression of a vibrant, broad and highly dynamic sexual marketplace between kathoeys and men. For ‘full’ men, it creates the facade of fleeting encounters that do not need to be considered as something significant to ‘who’ they are. For kathoeys, it creates a culture of constant transience in relationships.
A direct consequence of the sense in which sexual relations are typically seen as a one-off occurrence is the corollary idea that *kathoeys* are constantly on the search for new partners. This leads into an important structuring element in which gender comes to the fore in terms of attraction. We have described that ‘full’ men explain their sexual interactions with other men in terms of money, experimentation and a pressing need for sexual release. At the same time, we have suggested that the male preserves his masculinity by demonstrating sexual climax and ejaculation as the insertive partner. There is, however, another important element to attraction that defies such safe explanations. It involves the pleasure in active gender reversal that becomes central to the attraction for a male partner.

Indeed, a very common scenario we heard was that men turned to other men for companionship and comfort when confronting emotional hurt at the end of a relationship with a girlfriend. L tells us “men get brokenhearted so they turn to other men for comfort; sometimes they want to get back at girls so they take up with *kathoeys* instead”. *Kathoeys* and/or gay men are inevitably seen as solicitous and caring in the early stages of seduction. The young men emphasized the very direct reversal of attention to which they were familiar. To pursue an emotional and sexual relation with a woman takes tremendous time, effort and sometimes money (*tong owjay talort*). While sometimes it is important that the *kathoey* has feminine appearance to feed into male fantasies, even more central to the appeal is the role reversal. Young men described to us how in fact they themselves felt feminized by the solicitous attention from the *kathoey* as they are transposed into the female position by the active attention from the *kathoey*. It is a form of temporary social, sexual and emotional transformation that undermines the idea that male-*kathoey* relations are a homology of male-female relations. The reversal takes place in several ways:

- financially – it is the *kathoey* who provides the material exchange;
- emotionally, it is the *kathoey* who does all the leg work ‘*kathoey owjay geng*’;
- sexually, it is the *kathoey* who is active in terms of seduction, suggestive behaviour and sexual initiation.

All three are the opposite of what is typically expected of the female in male-female relations: all three the opposite of normative masculinity. Thus, the feminine *kathoey* takes on male roles, just as the ‘male’ relishes his feminisation. This was pointed out to us by X, who observed that: “Just as man is to woman, so *kathoey* is to male. *We phu bao* become the women in this context, this is what is appealing.”

This reversal also explains why in contrast to male-female relations, the young man is always seen to *sia tua* – to ‘lose himself’ to the *kathoey*. It signals there is something else at stake in the exchange – that gives the *kathoey* the dominant position in the exchange. In this dynamic, the *kathoey* is gaining something from the man – his sperm, his pleasure (and in some men’s eyes - his shame) – in ways that assert control of the relationship which are not applicable to a woman (who always ‘loses’ herself to the man).

Thus, despite the prominent claims to masculinity being preserved by an insertive role in specific sexual practice, more fundamental transformations are happening on a number of levels. We cannot maintain that masculinity is unchallenged in these unions; rather, the very appeal of much of the relationships for the young men rests primarily on the relief from having
to uphold forms of social manliness. Importantly, this extends beyond the ‘straight’ male-
kathoey dyad we have been describing and includes a wider range of men being comfortable
with each other sexually. A number of men described to us how easy it was to be with another
man (friends or peers), how easy it was to understand each other and how easy it was not to
have to achieve gendered expectations of pleasuring a woman.

In a similar vein, the research team was told by one young woman that she felt second-place to
kathoey in competition for a male partner:

They have a tremendous advantage because as a male they know exactly what another
man likes sexually. For women, it is much harder to know how to please a man. We know
it is important, but we are not taught about these things.

Certainly, these forms of social and sexual affinity between men are countered strongly by the
embedded sense that long-term love and security are born of a family unit. To have a wife and
even more so, to have children and raise a family is perhaps the most powerful symbol of social
reproduction in Laos. All other forms of relationship are denied legitimacy and any form of
social longevity. There is thus an on-going tension between emotional and physical attraction
among men that builds out of social intimacy and the countervailing security provided by the
family structure. There is also a prevalent (mild) homophobia common in male culture that
most men are aware of, although it is nowhere as strong as the homosocial/homosexual divide
in the West. Thus, many ‘full’ men confront complex forms of on-going negotiation to resolve
the tensions that are implicit within these divergent desires.

Finally, for some lads (and some sectors of youth culture, in general), it is highly fashionable to
be able to list a kathoey lover as part of one’s repertoire. Alcohol and drugs also play their part.
There has been a proliferation of large drink shops and discos in bigger cities where young
people (there seems to be a fairly loose degree of age limit control on drinking) freely mingle
amidst large amounts of alcohol consumption. This contributes directly to the growing sexual
permissiveness of young Laotian men and women, and also to the increased levels of same-sex
experimentation within these peer groups. Drugs are an issue, but not one we have sought to
investigate thoroughly. While amphetamines have been closely associated with urban youth
cultures across Asia, and specifically in urban Laos, we heard little evidence of their association
with increased sexual appetite. We did hear, however, of several instances of kathoey using
amphetamines as alternatives to cash exchange for young men with whom they sleep.

**Desire and Erections**

There are many popular understandings of what constitutes desire in male-male relations in
Laos. Some of these defer to broader structural issues: money, age/beauty, power exploitation,
and transient gender reversal. But although far less spoken, desire is also deeply embedded
in ways of understanding and experiencing one’s body and one’s potential for emotional
exchange. In turn, this has profound implications for the types of relations that emerge
both in the popular imagination and in reality. In each instance their relevance is central to
understanding the cultural nature of sexuality and, at the same time, vulnerability to HIV.
Many post-structuralist academics have argued gender is performative, which is to say it is an identity tenuously constructed through specific acts. These acts are not random, but have specific links to appropriate achievement of gender and its sub-groups. We can very clearly demarcate different expectations labeled on *kathoey* (and by extension gay men) in Lao society; they are in direct distinction to either male or female characterisations or expectations.

Let us begin with D’s description of his relationships as it sets the stage for how many ‘full’ men feel about the *kathoey* with whom they have sex. D is a strapping and somewhat rugged looking 23-year-old who works in a large beer restaurant. He comes from a northern province and had never seen nor heard of *kathoey* before he arrived in Vientiane. He sleeps in a room at the back of the restaurant where he works with about 15 other waiters and cooks. He says about 5-6 other guys at the restaurant will, like him, sleep with *kathoey* when the occasion arises.

My first time of sex with a *kathoey* wasn’t that pleasant. I accompanied him to a guesthouse when I was drunk. We hugged and kissed and had oral sex. I wanted to know what it was like with a *kathoey*, but ended up feeling pressured to have sex. I was a bit anxious. I wanted to try because I had seen other guys at the restaurant wearing jewellery and getting other gifts and money from *kathoey*.

Lots of very beautiful *kathoey* come to the restaurant. Sometimes I am not even sure they are *kathoey* when I go out with them. Usually I get between 50,000-100,000 kip. The most I have been given is 1,000 baht (250,000 kip). Money is the main reason I will have sex with a *kathoey*. The second reason is for the sex. Some of my friends like the emotional support they get and I can see what they mean. But one problem is that you cannot get too close to them – they drop you after one or two times together. So I don’t want to get to like them too much – I will just end up getting hurt. It is easy to feel comfortable with a *kathoey*. They talk to us like a guy will talk to a girl. They treat you very well.

Sex is at least three times more active with a *kathoey*. Sweat is everywhere. You get three times as tired. They suck all the strength out of you. Your joints end up sore – as if all your juices have been sucked out. You end up getting thin, your arms and legs lose strength and your face looks really thin. Overall, I don’t think it is worth the money.

They will hit you if they are angry, and they drop you easily. There is no security with a *kathoey*. They get bored so easily and are always changing partners. They change because they feel that they have already had you. They always say – *dai khon nan laaw, yaak dai khon mai* – ‘I have had him already; I want someone new’.

Overall I prefer women. There is more physical attraction, even if *kathoey* take better care of you. My parents could never accept me being with a *kathoey* as a partner – we could never be a real couple. We couldn’t have children. But even so, I do feel strongly when I am with a *kathoey*. When you sleep with girls, you have to give everything; it always costs you in some shape or form – *norm gap phu ying mii tae sia* (when you sleep with a girl, you have to pay for everything). It takes a long time to get a girl. If I get money from being with *kathoey*, I will sometimes split it with my girlfriend, but I would never tell I have had sex. I tell her they give me money for hanging out with them.
Some *kathoey* come to the restaurant to look for boys; other come just for a drink. I don’t want others to know I sometimes go with them. If the girls knew, they would think I am like a prostitute.

Before I go, we have to agree on money. Or they will ask us first if we want a new mobile phone or something like that. They will pay more money for guys who are virgins. They can tell by looking at their penises. Some guys get money from *kathoey* so they can take girls out. I am usually drunk when I am with a *kathoey*, so they do it all. [A number of men echoed that they had to be drunk before they would sleep with a *kathoey*.]

We can see in the above description a widely held belief. Amongst most of our informants, *kathoey* and full men accepted that *kathoeys* (and sometimes gay men) have more sexual desire and more lust (*tanhaa*) than other men or women. We see it described in tales of the number of men per night; the occasions for group sex, and the on-going quest for a new partner. J, a 20-year-old student in an upcountry city, related glowingly: “There was one time in my dorm – I did all 15 guys there at one time. Both hands, mouth and anus. They shut the room and took off all their clothes. It was great.” Likewise, in another province, M related how on one occasion at a local festival in a rural village ten young lads took her aside. She tried to accommodate them all, but got too tired and “picked up her skirts and ran”. These sort of stories are not uncommon. Everyone knows of them and coupled with notions of perpetual interest in sex, it feeds into the on-going construction of *kathoeys* as sexually voracious.

Some (usually non-*kathoey* men) explain this seemingly inexhaustible desire in biological terms: that there is a fundamental deficiency in sperm production in *kathoey* men and they therefore seek to replenish their source of semen from other men. Thus, oral sex is almost exclusively associated with *kathoeys* (rather than women) – in addition to actively giving pleasure, people believe *kathoeys* have a deep seated desire for male semen to reclaim a functioning masculinity (and be able to sire a family). As N, a 19-year-old student from a rural area, tells us: “*Kathoeys* get semen from guys. They need it because their bodies cannot produce it. They are always chasing men and they spend a lot of time trying to suck it all from them”. Not everyone believes these details in their more literal connotations, but they underpin a widely held belief that *kathoeys* are deficient ‘males’ which, in turn, leads to heightened sexual desire. Others explain it in terms of having both male and female energies combined, therefore maximizing sexual desire from both sides. As N tells us, “*Kathoeys* have more desire for sex because they are a mixture of both men and women; it is logical that they have more appetite for sex than other people.”

Other explanations for the supposed elevated lust are more circular. They are important because they explain more thoroughly the on-going context of changing partners. They also highlight how mainstream beliefs have implications for bodily experiences. We mentioned that *kathoeys* ‘performing’ *kathoey* properly are not, in local understandings, supposed to get erections. Even as many *kathoeys* themselves know the reality to be different, this belief marks out a clear form of physiological distinction that separates *kathoeys* from other men.

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17 In the distributed questionnaire at the 2006 MSM meeting in Vientiane, just over 35% of Laotian attendees answered that homosexuality is caused by lack of male hormones (testosterone). Just over 40% answered this is not true and roughly 25% said they didn’t know. Thus, even in trained outreach workers, a biological premise for homosexuality based on deficiency is widely supported. (Cambodia had similar responses – a huge majority of Vietnamese believed it to be true; no Thai respondents believed it.)
It is a perception typically held by ‘full’ men because they want to believe their partner is feminine. If the kathoey has an erection, there is no intrinsic difference between the two – and phu bao cannot cope with this recognition. To see an erection is too confronting, too shocking and, in their words, absolutely ‘disgusting’ or kha nyuang. They tell us they would never touch another man or kathoey’s penis. Kathoey confirm the story. They tell us that a majority of their male partners will not touch their genitals. “Phu bao don’t like to touch a kathoey’s penis. They won’t come near it – they would never touch it – they prefer to pretend it doesn’t exist, they will grasp our breasts and squeeze them, but never go lower.”

This disavowal of the presence of more than one erection can make things complicated between two men who see themselves as friends. C, a phu bao, tells us:

The main reason I sleep with other men is for sexual release. I often share a bed with friends, particularly soldiers from the nearby army camp after we have been drinking together. We only hug and kiss. Usually I want him to touch me because I get horny, but I would never think of touching him back – this is disgusting. But if the other guy is a full man, he won’t touch me either. If he is not 100% male, he will. Because I won’t touch him, the other man will usually just masturbate himself. I never masturbate in front of another man.

It is not just straight men, but significantly kathoeys who also strongly reproduce this image of unwanted erections. Many told us they do not want the male to touch them as they themselves are often embarrassed to be seen with an erection. They note that their partner will immediately reject them and furthermore spread the word that this is not what a kathoey should be. A number of kathoey echoed the anticipated and undesirable response – “What a large penis; how can you possibly be a ‘proper’ kathoey?” thereby immediately destroying their reputation and appeal. For example, J notes; “I can’t let a man see that I have an erection as he would tell everyone that I am not a real kathoey. No more men would want to have sex with me. And I would certainly never come, then they would say, “Oh, there is the kathoey with semen (nam)”. Or W observes, “I would never let another man see my penis. I think he would hate it as much as I do”. P explained the definitive difference:

If a guy sees that a kathoey has an erection, he would think he is not a real kathoey and could instead be with a woman. If the guy tries to touch my penis, I will stop the sex immediately.

This insistence that ‘proper’ kathoeys do not have erections or physically evident sexual pleasure is a major form of leverage into a form of sexual denial and enforced penis-less ‘femininity’. It allows ‘full’ men to exert dominance even as they are succumbing to the above mentioned gender reversals. Not all kathoey feel this way – some relish having erections and there are times when they are able to bring a man to recognize this and even share in its enjoyment. But they do so knowing full well they are flaunting the main performative features of being a kathoey.

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18 As in Laos, Ten Brummelhuis (1999) notes that some Thai kathoey see “their penis as a source of embarrassment,” while others retain the pleasure “derived from their penis,” and that likewise their partners responses range from shock to acceptance of the kathoey’s penis (p. 125). However, his conclusion that during sex between kathoey and heterosexual males, “the question of having or not having a penis has almost become an irrelevant matter” (p. 135) is not verified in our research. Similar to our findings, he also notes of the anxiety felt by some men in their experience with women, which is countered by the warmth and familiarity of homosocial contact with other (kathoey) men.
A majority of kathoeys therefore put active effort into not getting, suppressing or not showing erections. If not, the presence of an erection raises the very real spectre of being a ‘failed’ kathoey in contemporary Laos. It is believed a failed kathoey will get no partners and no satisfaction. In addition to the desire to avoid an erection for the message it sends to one’s partner, other men added that they try to avoid an orgasm because after a climax, receptive anal sex hurts more than before and desire wanes rapidly.

Kathoeys and some gay men described how they will never remove their own clothes so that their genitals are not disclosed during sex; others suggested it is easy to hide erections by lying face down during anal intercourse. They would never have sex face up. Others told us after years of feminine identification, erections just don’t happen any more, such feelings are too uncomfortable. Still others take hormones both for breast enlargement and skin clarity, but also very clearly to decrease the intrusion of an erection (although - unlike in Thailand - very few opt for surgery). We should note that it is precisely this form of embodied typecasting that is being challenged by some forms of gay identity, in which physical arousal is able to be enjoyed mutually. This is precisely what Suk meant in our prelude when she said she was unsure if she could do ‘gay’ – maintain and share enjoyment of her own erection.

Pleasure in Finding More Partners

It is also highly significant that the denial or suppression of erections has distinct discursive implications as well as emotional and physical effects. It very markedly involves the transfer of pleasure to the partner. P, a 30-year-old living outside of Vientiane, told us how it removes the locus of pleasure from his body to that of his partner:

> My pleasure relies entirely on that of the guy, I get pleasure from his pleasure. I like to do oral better because I can be more active and guys like it more also. But if it takes too long, then he can do me from behind. It hurts, but it feels good. I never have an orgasm. I get my pleasure (khwamsuk) from his orgasm. Kathoeys have more desire because they have no climax (bo mii jut rabay). They have to keep looking for more men to satisfy their desire.

N added how he also had to feel he had ‘won’ (xana); ie he had seduced the young man who had given in to his sexual prowess. His pleasure came from the conquest. Instead of their own orgasm, the majority of men who disdained having erections told us that their pleasure lies instead in the orgasm of their partner. Some of the more reflective kathoeys suggested that it is precisely because they have no specific physiological climax that their pleasure rests in ensuring they are able to make their partner climax and accept his semen. D, in another town, comments: “You only completely have (dai) the man when you ‘swallow’ his semen.” For many, the act of ‘possession’ entails receiving semen inside the body. Conveniently, ‘full’ men readily interpret this as the physiological need for sperm on the part of the kathoey, and so the narrative is efficiently reproduced.

Several informants added that the lack of specific climax (jut rabay) means a constant search for satisfaction and, for many kathoeys, pleasure comes from ‘having’ many partners rather than

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19 Such tropes are not uncommon in heterosexual relations, either, but they do not usually involve sublimation of the male’s orgasm.
orgasm, per se. In other words, on-going desire becomes a constant, determinative effect that is stimulated by the physical and social structures created within and by the normative kathoey identity. Because a specific mode of orgasm is so effectively denied, and pleasure is alternatively gained through a partner’s orgasm - the idea is created that kathoeys have more desire, and thereby a constant stream of partners, precisely because they are never fulfilled. Thus, as many men observed to us, sexual appetite becomes the key element of kathoey communal solidarity built around repeated and multiple sexual encounters.

These forms of social conditioning have many expressions. Kathoeys share the competition for young men. Amongst themselves they describe how they compete with each other for partners – this is a predominant form of sociality amongst kathoeys. It becomes an on-going exercise to possess as many men as possible – and then compare notes. In some rural areas, we heard from a smallish group of kathoeys that they will keep note of how many men they sleep with each month to see who amongst them is ‘getting’ more young men. We heard the same in the cities. Thus, through a combination of perceived characteristics – either physiologically deficient (inadequate semen) or endowed (combined male-female two-spirit), full of lust, emotionally prohibited from long-term partners, socially competitive, bound by stringent age constraints - a kathoey’s life becomes, above all, a highly sexualized social identity.

**Sex and Exploitation**

The social order has thus created a supremely effective - and exploitative - model whereby the kathoey sublimes his/her own pleasure and, in turn, this creates a ready source of sexual access for ‘full’ men whenever, wherever they want. In a subtly elegant fashioning of power, the heterosexual structuring of society makes kathoeys ever available by creating a role that subordinates their pleasure through that of their partners. Some might argue that this typifies male-female relations in hetero-normative societies the world over; but what is different here is the highly and overtly sexualized nature of the kathoeys that (apart from the way female prostitutes are often typecast) cannot be labeled on women, in general. Pleasure is not just sublimated; it is repressed in such a way as to increase sexual availability and contact. Overlaying these dynamics, money becomes the means by which such relations are codified and deemed functional in Lao society. What this masks is the on-going exploitation of permanent sexual provision for normative masculine men.

In practical terms, it means there is a constant change in partners based on the way the need for satisfaction is created. It also means kathoeys are denied any possibility of long-term relationships, because their social and performative role is totally shaped by the ethos of short-term sexual contact with many men. As J in Luang Prabang described, “Because kathoeys have more desire, they get bored more easily so they have to always find new partners.” Most men, kathoeys, gays and ‘straight’ defined this constant search for a new partner as the most overarching characteristic of kathoey (and somewhat gay) life. To what extent it is true for each individual, of course, varies. Nonetheless, it is the overriding perception of what is central to a kathoey (and gay) identity. Even if it doesn’t characterise all kathoeys lives in actual practice, it is the identity benchmark against which they are inevitably drawn to measure themselves. We see it emerging in the vignettes and stories we include in the annexes, where desire and pleasure is clearly emergent in the possibility of short-term and exciting sexual encounters. It
stems from both the sublimated need for pleasure that is transferred onto the partner, and it stems from the denial of opportunities for anything beyond short-term sexual contact devoid of long-term emotional potential

Of course, there are exceptions: Some kathoys (and gay men) profess love for only one man and refuse to engage in multiple sexual contacts. Others find ways to get comeuppance on the men around them, drawing satisfaction from ditching them after one encounter, or flaunting their power to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to their attentions. Nor should we interpret these dynamics as meaning there is no sexual pleasure. As P noted above, he will allow anal sex even though it hurts – it still ‘feels’ really good (mii haeng). Many echoed this notion. None of the men we spoke with indicated that lack of orgasm meant no sexual pleasure. Foregoing orgasm, rather, appears to diffuse sexual pleasure in complex ways and, importantly for us, is built into an ongoing narrative that explains why kathoys are perpetually seeking sexual contact with new partners. Even though this type of story does not describe every kathoey or gay man’s life, it is the dominant narrative against which they measure their own choices and experiences.

**Different Viewpoints: ‘Full’ Men and Same-Sex Desire**

These ways of understanding male-male sexuality do not simply emanate and inform the lives of kathoys. ‘Full’ men (and women) also partake in their reproduction and, thereby, the production of the various forms of masculinity that this study describes. Biology and thoughts on semen are important here: They add a degree of validity to the perpetuation of these popular narratives.

There is a widespread belief amongst many young men that semen is a limited commodity. This doesn’t necessarily impact heavily on practice, but it does highlight beliefs that shape sexual identities. We heard a variety of notions about possible negatives associated with masturbation and semen loss. Some felt it stunted growth or hampered muscle development. F, a young man in Vientiane, voiced a typical belief. He is scared of ejaculation when he sleeps with other men (as friends) and fears that losing semen will weaken him to the point that he will be unable to have sex with a woman or his wife when he gets married. The biggest fear is that he will not be able to father children due to sperm deficiency that has been expended during younger years.

The non-renewable nature of semen also informs perceptions of why kathoys desire oral sex. Most ‘full’ men that we spoke with described the pleasure of sex with kathoys, which is viewed as exotic, varied and unrestrained. In particular, oral sex is strongly associated with having sex with kathoys. Not only is it seen as something women (apart from occasional sex workers) will not do, it is also considered to be intrinsic to a kathoey’s needs. Thus, ‘full’ men also commonly noted how metaphorically and physiologically drained they felt by sex with another man (kathoey). Like D’s comments earlier, we heard many descriptions from young men that suggest a number of debilitating physiological effects:

- After sex with a kathoey, one’s joints are always sore, and one’s knees and elbows can barely move.
- Sex with a kathoey once is as tiring as sex three times with a woman; they suck all the juices.
• A kathoey needs the sperm from men so that their penises will get strong again and they can have children.
• A kathoey will want to have sex all night. They will wake me up and keep trying to get me to have another erection – 2-3 times at least. A woman only wants it once; kathoeys want it much more.
• You can tell who has been having sex with a kathoey. Their faces get thin and their skin gets yellow.
• A kathoey needs more sex than other people.
• A kathoey will keep sucking until the blood comes out of the penis. One has to remove his/her head immediately after ejaculation to prevent this.
• With a woman, your semen will emerge naturally, and there is still some left; with a kathoey, the semen gets sucked out and is completely taken.
• If you let a kathoey suck your juices, you will become homosexual.

Such comments were common from ‘full’ men in our research. It indicates how anxieties are lodged in physiological response to sex between men. Thus, in addition to the risk of being seen as seeking money inappropriately (social decline), perceived deleterious effects of male-male sex also depict male physical decline. The above comments highlight a clear combination of both desire and fear. As much as there is recognition of sexual freedom for men, there are also pressures to preserve boundaries that protect ‘masculine’ integrity. Many men relish sex with other men based on the appeal of having a partner who can share a sense of maleness (pen garn eng ngai), be enormously solicitous (owjay geng), and offer far greater and more exciting (kakkua) sexual variety than women. These combined pleasures lead men to readily, as some put it, ‘cheat’ kathoeys out of their money.

At the same time, we see deeply embedded anxiety at being subsumed by overwhelming sexual appetite of these ‘caring’ males to the point that the body (and psyche) is at risk. Vampire-like metaphors of intrinsic essences being lost to the kathoey, in particular, suggest fear that some essential maleness is at stake. In the sexual encounter, the kathoey threatens the phu bao’s integrity through removal of the fundamental essence of his maleness: semen, understood as the one commodity that the kathoey is lacking. Thus, just as masculinity is not a guaranteed condition and can be lost with an on-going kathoey relationship, so too these notions indicate the flexibility within such categories by describing the khatheoy’s need for semen as the basis of his heightened sexual desire so as to become a fully functioning male again.

Thus, coupled with desire is a profound fear and a deeply entrenched rationale for distancing. As much as there are multiple levels of appeal, so there are both social and sexual distancing mechanisms. The kathoey remains relegated to brief and controlled sexual excursions, which are motivated through tremendous sexual appeal and tempered by an equal worry over loss of bodily integrity. Thus, even while acknowledging flexibility, the poles on our continuum are also preserved as co-terminous through classic tropes of sexual desire and countervailing anxiety over untrammeled pleasure.

Significantly, we see these tropes changing in the emergence of the gay identity, where variations of sexual pleasure provide alternative choices. On the one hand, many ‘full’ Laotian men prefer the more effeminate kathoeys because it is understood that they will not be
confronted by erections; with gay men, it is not so sure. On the other hand, there is a growing number of men who are more at ease with mutual sexual pleasure. As with kathoeys, the appeal is multi-sided. Some ‘full’ men said that they would rather spend time with gay men than kathoeys on the assumption that their interest in a sexual relationship with a male partner would be less obvious to their friends or in larger social circles. Some men are also not worried about a loss of manhood or threatened by the presence of an erection which is not their own and, as such, male camaraderie can readily lead to physical intimacy. One way or another, the sexual landscape in Laos is changing.
Chapter 5

Love and Sex

Changing Positions

We have been describing how the biological and the social are always deeply inter-related. Ideas about the body affect relationships; beliefs about relationships affect physical experiences. The emotional aspects of sexual encounters are also crucial elements of relationships. The growing profile of gay in Lao culture illustrates intersecting levels of individual, social and political forces that govern ideas about bodies, sex and the emotional needs involved.

In addition to Thai television, another form of media is bringing sexuality into a more public forum in Laos. The country is currently saturated with pornography. Cheap porn videodiscs are available by the boxload in video outlets everywhere throughout the country. Sex movies have become a highly fashionable commodity amongst young people, with many commenting that they are a major catalyst of social and sexual change. They include an increasing amount of widely watched Western and Asian gay material. More recently, MP4 players in mobile phones allow teenagers and students to share locally-made porn clips, including homosexual sex. In short, Laotians are seeing men have sex with men in Western or other Asian settings in ways that do not conform to the standard male-kathoey model.

The effects of media exposure to Western (or Thai) gay sexuality cannot be underplayed. It is creating new options for middle ground between the kathoey – ‘full man’ ends of the continuum. Now men who enjoy sex with other men wonder if they are gay, rather than kathoey, because they still get erections. Gay is gaining prominence as a means by which some kathoeys can resolve previously contradictory sensations: physical arousal and abiding preference for a male partner. Another trend is promoted by the growing presence of gay as an alternative form of socio-sexual identification. Men who sleep with kathoeys no longer have the secure knowledge that, if they are not effeminate and enjoy erections, they remain ‘full’ men.

There is a growing sense that male-male relations are possible without adoption of overt femininity. Some men observed to us that, while they never thought they might be kathoey, they consider that they may well be gay because of the number of times they have sex with other men. There is a sense that masculinity is not so watertight and one can move along the continuum after multiple sexual relations. C, living outside Vientiane, tells us that he gets emotional pleasure from being close to male friends and enjoys sleeping with them. He talks of exchanging hugs and kisses, rather than more active sex, refuses to touch another man’s penis, and doesn’t want to sleep with a kathoey who might well touch him. He still regards himself as a ‘full’ man, and says he likes women 70% and men 30%. He says he could imagine a male partner and adopting a child, rather than taking a wife. So far, he hasn’t had the courage

20 Participants at the MSM workshop in Vientiane in 2006 were asked to complete a KAP questionnaire. Tellingly, more so than the representatives from other countries, nearly 40% of the Lao respondents (men working in outreach programmes) answered that ‘real’ men can become homosexual by socializing too much with them. An equal number said they didn’t know, and just over 20% said this is not true.
to get close to a woman, and has not yet had sex with a female. He is wondering whether his attraction to men is increasing when recently he ‘forced’ himself to give oral sex to another man whom he really liked. He also likes being a more sensitive man than his other village friends, who are into drugs and fighting. He wonders whether being effeminate is contagious. There are many *kathoeys* in his village who come out at an early age. For his own part, he likes the fact that he can be tough like a man and also do the woman’s chores in his household.

N is an 18-year-old student. He has had three girlfriends with whom he has had sex. Only six months prior to the interview had he first had sex with a man. It was a gradual seduction that occurred while looking at porn movies with some gay/kathoey friends. He wanted to try with a *kathoey* because he had heard it was ‘good’, so he asked for all the lights to be turned out and performed anal sex. At first he said he found it hard to get an erection; he had almost no desire. Slowly, as familiarity increased, desire became more similar to that with a woman. Now, after several months, he feels he likes women 70% and men 30%. He has also developed a strong emotional attachment for P, a gay man. He says this is because P takes care of him so much better than his previous girlfriends. This man wanted him to share sexual activities and N agreed to receptive anal sex ‘out of love’. He now thinks that maybe he is gay.

Like the above examples, the motivation for such re-evaluation is not just due to sexual pleasure, but also emotional support. This is an element of sexual relations that very rarely gets included in studies of sexuality geared to AIDS prevention. We heard from several men that they had become disillusioned with their future prospects and the possibility of continued heartache after unsuccessful love affairs with women. In response, they turn to male lovers and the emotional succor they provide. The reverse is also often the case. We heard numerous cases of *kathoeys* or gay men telling us of lost love when the young man removed himself as boyfriend and took a wife.

Thus, we must consider positions on the continuum as somewhat fluid for a number of men. To put this in perspective, there are still many (probably a majority) men who do not at any point in their lives consider relations with another male. But for others, on-going desire to sleep with gay men or *kathoeys* is introducing a more nuanced form of identification. In the past, one might have more readily denied one was *kathoey* if one had no interest in taking on feminine characteristics. Now, as ‘gay’ is becoming slowly recognized as a social identity, ‘full’ men who continue to sleep with other men are wondering if they are themselves ‘gay’. In other words, to be a 100% male is less impermeable than in the past. Most men do not choose to consider this, resisting the notion that they be anything but complete men. But some do. We see this in A’s description of his life with M (see Annex 3, p. 112) where he wonders about his identity now that he is having an on-going relationship with another man. Even when there is a sense of leaning towards ‘gay’ as an identity, most young men assume that at some point marriage will nullify this and they will revert to full-fledged normative masculinity. There are also many *kathoeys* who have no inclination to become gay, or be anything but overtly feminized.

The increased presence of foreigners adds to the destabilising of categories. Both gay men and *kathoeys* have relationships with Western men. It is generally agreed that Western gay men prefer Lao gay men over most *kathoeys*, who are considered too effeminate (the reverse would be true for the occasional Western straight man who has sex with *kathoeys*). Thus, where older Laotian men are a prominent source of money for sexual interactions for *kathoeys*, Western
gay men are considered the prime source of money (within emotional or sexual relationships) for Laotian gay men. This is one source of pressure on the divide between *kathoey* and gay. Some *kathoey* attempt to refigure themselves as gay in order to be more eligible for Western partners. It is based on the notion that Western gay men provide more potential for long-term and financially beneficial relations. This is not to say Western men are all consuming in terms of their appeal. A large number of Lao men we interviewed strongly preferred Laotian partners based on many things, including body size and smell (Western men smell different and are too large), sexual practice (Western men are too enthusiastic and have different sensual forms of pleasure) and overall demeanour. More positively, Western men potentially offer long-term love and money (as well as erotic appeal), and these two elements provide central attraction. In any event, we see the intermediate category of our continuum gaining constituents from either end.

In its emerging formations, ‘gay’ is both similar and different than *kathoey*; it is both similar and different than ‘full’ male. To a certain extent, gayness shares with *kathoey* the popular and self-internalised notions of heightened sexual desire for other males. To date, differences lie largely in physical appearance, mannerisms and, most importantly, in forms of sexual activity – to be gay in Laos means to take exchanging sexual roles with the same partner (*piangarn het*), and expect shared physical pleasure and arousal. As P in Vientiane notes, “I like being gay because I don’t want to always be taken advantage of (*sia piap*). I want to share. With men, you can share experiences because we have the same bodies; with women, you are not sure what you are sharing.”

‘Gay’ is different from ‘full’ male in that it imagines homoerotic desire as the most natural and comfortable, but there are also similarities between the two. Physiological capacity (having an erection) is seen as the ticket to hetero-normative lifestyles irrespective of emotional desire. In the past, many men who enjoy sex with men moved into hetero-normative invisibility provided by a family (*mii mia bang naa*). As gay becomes more widespread, this pressure is lessening a little, but it has not disappeared. Many men we spoke with who currently enjoy sex with men suggested that they will subsequently marry and have families; based on the fact they become genitally aroused with men, they assume that their physical capabilities will allow them to develop a hetero-normative family life. In this light, erections are a symbolic marker that allows for movement along the continuum away from *kathoey* to gay, and with it further connotations of bisexuality and the ability to father a family. The possibility of taking a wife and raising a family was inevitably described in physical terms – the ability to consummate a relationship - rather than emotional love or sexual object choice (although some men did suggest they would feel sympathy for a wife who did not receive adequate emotional affection from them).

A number of informants anticipated or had already taken wives. One survey participant, G, took a wife for a combination of reasons, including the different types of love expectation associated with marriage and his own passion for a female that was instigated by an affair with a *kathoey* (see Annex 3, p. 98). He found he enjoyed sex as an insertive partner with a feminized male, but had been disgusted by sex with a ‘full’ male. In other words, he found hetero-gender sex appealing. He chose to marry a woman for her social and emotional attributes, as well as the physical relations he has come to appreciate. G says that he has relinquished all desire for men. Others say they will marry just to preserve ‘face’ for their parents (*mi na mi tha*), but they will continue sex with men regardless. One reason a number of these men choose to marry is precisely because emotional desire is denied fulfillment in many male-male relations.
Short-term Horizons

Emotional needs come in many forms. We have described how everyday *kathoey* lifestyle is typified by short-term sexual liaisons often with an accompanying form of material exchange. The reasons why relationships are short can be explained in a number of ways. They are all products of specific forms of powerful social conditioning:

- *Kathoey* might prefer fleeting exchanges as the ‘possession’ entailed and the pleasure derived is heightened with new partners.
- Short-term liaisons allow for social competition and self-value as the number of partners ‘acquired’ goes up.
- There is widespread fatalism and/or realistic appraisal about the chances of an enduring relationship. Reciprocal emotional investment is recognised as futile or impossible and will only lead to disappointment as no ‘man’ will take a *kathoey* as a long-term partner in Lao society.
- Lao society to date has made no room for alternative possibilities.

At heart, the completely transient nature of most male-male relationships stems from the lack of viable models of love between two men in a public and social sense. A number of *kathoey* surveyed had been left heartbroken after being deserted by lovers who chose to marry (although, as mentioned, a number of men said they became interested in sexual relationships with other men because of ill-fated love with a woman). The pressure to raise a family is huge. Men internalize this as the chief means by which they can attain the appropriate status as a mature Lao adult. So, young men, who might enjoy male sexual and social companionship, do not see this as an enduring form of social partnership.

Despite the focus on money or sexual pleasure, love itself (or its absence) is central to the short shelf-life of male-male relations. On the one hand, a woman’s love is understood as more enduring, complementary and self-sacrificing. Male-male love is widely seen by *kathoey* and gay men as competitive rather than complementary. T, who is 18-years-old, is very clear that he is a *kathoey* who loves sex with men (and sleeps with an average of 1-2 lads per week). To date, he has never slept with a woman, although he is tempted after seeing porn movies and listening to his friends. He, nonetheless, intends to take a wife:

> I still get strong erections, so I can marry. To be a *kathoey* for long means they [erections] will disappear. Love is different with a woman…men and women can trust each other; *kathoey* cannot trust another man’s love. Men and women have more mutual responsibility; there is more security in the future. It is clear what each person’s role is – to be the male or to be the female. But two men together are always looking for advantage from each other (*tong day ponprayot*). It is also a problem when you get old. Noone wants an old boyfriend. So I will probably get married. But I won’t give up having sex with men – I will just have to pay for it when I am old.

Monogamy between men is regarded as impossible by most men who spoke with the research team, be they gay, straight or *kathoey*. *Kathoey* and gay men felt that it was due to the elevated and or more pronounced lust they embody, it is physiologically impossible to resist desiring new partners. As we have described, this is inseparable from the emotional need to gain satisfaction from a sense of engaging, seducing and pleasuring ‘straight’ men.
This is not to say *kathoey* do not love; but from our discussions, romantic love and sex can become very clearly separated. A number of *kathoey* mentioned that they would love ‘from a distance’. This allowed the love a degree of longevity even as it was unrequited and mostly unannounced. Love was described by some as the most feminine of characteristics they could assume and, as such, it should be selfless and unassuming. To have sex would in fact diminish the romantic connection, as one became overly physically intimate (and bored!). A number of *kathoey* described how the more they loved another man, the less they sexually desired him in part because they wished to show themselves as interested in a long-term emotional relationship rather than just sex. Sex is associated with short-term pleasure alone; pleasure derived from a few moments of fleeting ownership of that man’s sexual excitement. There are exceptions, but the researchers met no feminine *kathoey* in on-going relationships (although examples were mentioned).

Lads (*phu bao*) seldom regard relations with *kathoey* as anything but fleeting. Most explain the relations in terms of sexual adventurism and economic need (although never to the extent they see themselves as sex workers). We have mentioned fear of social disdain and concern over physical repercussions, but most commonly, *phu bao* told us they will not want to see the same *kathoey* again for fear that he (the *kathoey*) becomes too emotionally involved, ‘clingy’ and more obvious as a partner. The sexual exoticism lessens in repeat encounters. More importantly, a number of men recognised that on-going relations did, in fact, mean that one was perhaps not a 100% man. J noted, “It is possible that after sleeping with a *kathoey* a few times, one can easily become gay. Or alternatively one might get married, but still enjoy having sex with men on the side.” J added a further nuance to increased choices, noting that “if a guy is not good looking, he will never get a girlfriend; but if he becomes a *kathoey*, he will always be able to get sex.”

**Men, Women and Comparative Love**

Even as some men are increasingly regarding themselves as gay, there remains an opposite and pronounced movement into hetero-normative lifestyles based on age and the desire to start a family. A number of men who enjoy sex with other men described their desire to have children and the security this represented in the future, both in terms of personal care when old and also the social acceptance that accompanied this degree of social normalcy. This extends beyond just personal security, but also feeds strongly into generational responsibility. I, who is 19 years old, told us he will give up all male lovers when in his mid 20’s and will marry because he wants to “give his mother a grandchild.”

The desire to get married stems from many reasons. L, a 26-year-old gay man from Luang Prabang, sums up a number of these and how they fit in complicated ways with possibilities for male-male relations. L likes Western male lovers better than Laotian men. He first had sex with a Laotian married man, but in the end stopped because he felt it was a sin to sleep with someone who was married. Since then, L has slept with men and women. He describes his relations with women as physically pleasurable, but offering no emotional excitement. He prefers to be with Western men because he feels that both their care and sex is better (*nimnuan*). He has had three Western lovers whom he met through the Internet. To L, Laotian men are more flighty and flirty (*layjay*), and can never be trusted. However, when he is with Laotian men, he prefers
that they be older because he doesn’t have to give money. L doesn’t think he could find an older Laotian male partner, though, because they are usually married. Sometimes older men split up with their wives. He spoke of an older married man who didn’t have sex with his wife for four months, which caused her suspicion and his confession of infidelity. They split up.

For L, gay life is very uncertain. There is no sincerity (bo jing jay) and no trust, only betrayal with Laotian men (bo suajay mii tae lawaeng). In addition, he adds that all gay men or kathoeys are promiscuous. The problem is the constant sexual attraction for other men that results in no concern for monogamy and constant flirting whenever apart, he says.

L is still shy about his sexuality and doesn’t show his feelings towards men at home. He is careful not to let his parents know. He says that he wouldn’t want his son to be gay – male-male relations are too fragile. He would take his son to do sports to make sure he is not effeminate. L thinks alot about marriage, but is worried he will be unfaithful and would feel sorry for his wife, “Some women must know their husbands are gay, but they put up with it. Men will take a wife just to protect themselves – to cover their faces (bang na).” L said that it makes him sad to see others in long-term relationships, so he thinks he will get married.

Oftentimes, gay, kathoey and ‘straight’ men indicated that a woman’s love was fundamentally different than a male’s love. G notes:

Love is about looking after each other; two men cannot do this the same as a woman and a man. The work a woman does is to be expected. She does it for love, and it is something normal (pen sing thamadaa). Men don’t share in the same way. When I am with a man (phu bao) I have to do everything, pay and provide the emotional support. This feels totally one-sided.

S agrees, “There is absolutely nothing shared but sex. The next day, we don’t even look each other in the eye.”

Idealized male-female love is often cited in contra-distinction to male-male love. Part of the impossibility for two Laotian men to share life in a long-term sense was predicted on role conflict. For instance, B notes, “You cannot trust Laotian men. They just try to deceive you; promise you love, but then leave. I want a Westerner.” Similarly, J tells us, “There has to be constant negotiation over roles. One side has to be the subordinate, but what ‘male’ would want that. For two guys together, this is an irresolvable problem.”

Comments like these were commonplace. In other words, the lack of clear role distinction is seen as a prohibitive obstacle. Rather than complementary roles, two men were regarded by many of our informants as not being able to share domesticity together precisely because they would always be in competition. One partner would always have to be the ‘leader’, financially and, perhaps, emotionally. The other partner would end up feeling subordinated, which would prove an untenable situation in the long run. Thus, we see that heterosexual frameworks have not yet been supplanted by Western notions of gender or sexual rights that allow the idea of two men to reside in equitable terms. Almost all our informants felt domesticity was not possible between two men, which is indeed reflected in the historical and contemporary dearth of any examples from Laos of long-term male-male relationships.
Gay Futures – Long-term Hopes

The arrival of Western and other Asian gay men in the past 10 years or so (and the relationship potential they represent) is changing this affective landscape within a diversifying libidinal economy, although its impact is limited to the urbanised centres of Laos. On the one hand, Western men are acceptable as economic mainstays because being supported by a foreigner does not raise the uncomfortable hierarchy that occurs between two Laotian men. Western men are not seen as competition because they represent broadened horizons where the same social structures no longer hold. They also provide a fulcrum by which the Lao social order is pried open to allow increasing visibility of longer-term relationships. Again, this view rests on economic leverage; the financial support for families or joint business ventures provided by Western men is bringing increasing acceptability and legitimacy to a public role for Laotian gay men as partners of Western men. On the other hand, the growing exposure to Western acceptance and desire for long-term male-male relations is altering the ways in which male relations are conceptualized. It is also transforming the idea that reciprocated love between two men cannot be realised.

Indeed, the emotional possibilities within male-male relations and the potential for long-term love relationships are gradually becoming refigured through both Western and westernized Asian visitors to Laos. Gay identity is emerging, in part, for the hope it represents for potentially long-term and more equalised relationships. Whereas, in the past, male-male relations were both defined and limited by heterosexual logic that sees men (kathoey) physically loving men who were different than them (‘full’ men’). Thus, their relationships, and what allowed them, were marked first and foremost by difference. Because gay relations challenge these commonly held views about sexual polarities in the society and seek to establish relations based on shared sexual experiences, a growing number of Laotian men purportedly aspire to what ‘gay’ represents. The evidence that growing numbers of Laotian men are now imagining longer-term relations as possible, premised on more even-handed emotional and sexual interaction and based on visible examples, is profound both socially, and as a component for HIV prevention.

Meanwhile, the incidence of Lao-Lao men in long-term relations is still low - it is too unfamiliar and not yet socially acceptable for domesticity to be couched in these terms. Additionally, due to their itinerant presence of Western foreigners in Laos, on-going interaction with multiple partners still continues, and monogamy is not necessarily an associated element of even these relations. Nonetheless, the increased episodic and repeated unions that are more frequently seen when one partner is Western does signal the presence of longevity not present in most kathoey-male or relations between two Lao gay men.

This is not to say all Laotian gay men or kathoeys we spoke with want Western partners. More than half our sample indicated they preferred Asian partners. This was based on many things, including body type, genital size, smell, type of sexual practice (according to some Laotian men they prefer the young Laotian men because they ejaculate more quickly than the older Western men) and so forth. Some kathoeys were very clear that the Laotian men knew how to treat them as ‘women’; Western gay men treated them as ‘men’, physically and emotionally.21 Despite these preferences, there are also ample cases of Laotian men wanting Western partners.

21 This does not count the minority of Western men who actively seek out relations with effeminate kathoeys.
In turn, we can detect changes being wrought in the way relationships are imagined. Some *kathoeys* who would never let a Lao male see or touch their penis will allow such contact with a Western man.

As mentioned, these changes in perception are leading to movements from both poles of the continuum – *kathoeys* are thinking maybe they are or should be ‘gay’ for the changing forms of economic and emotional potential it represents. ‘Full’ men are wondering if they are gay because they are having on-going sexual relations with other men and/or *kathoeys*. Thus, the affective landscape of male-male erotic relationships (or put more blandly, the life-worlds of MSM in Laos) are marked by some very key structural elements and major forces of change. This is the terrain that both creates the need for HIV/AIDS and sexual health programmes in the first place, and the pre-requisite that these programmes be sensitively tailored to the complexities of how people understand their lives and the choices they are able to make.
Chapter 6

HIV/AIDS and Sexual Risk

Sexual risk for HIV or other STIs amongst the men who took part in this research is largely linked to two distinct characteristics of male-male sexuality in Laos: frequent change in partners and irregular condom use. In turn, potential HIV spread is escalated by the nature of sexual networks that reach across a wide age range of changing partners from young to old and within widely dispersed groups of men who have both male and female partners. Projects working on MSM are aware of these issues. How and why they occur needs further explanation.

As part of this research, 10 men from Vientiane and Luang Prabang kept a diary of their activities over a period of seven days - in other words, ‘a week in the life of’. The men were not a random sample. They were men with whom the research team had become reasonably familiar. Three were effeminate kathoey who normally dress as women; five were somewhat effeminate men who do not dress as women, but who sometimes call themselves kathoey, and other times they call themselves gay; and two think of themselves as gay rather than kathoey. The diaries document the rhythm of daily life for these ten men, and how social life, study and work intersect. They also provide information about sexual activity and the occasions when it took place. Each of the 10 respondents had sex at least once in the seven days, and three men had sex on four occasions or more during the week. Four men had sex with multiple partners in the same encounter on at least one occasion in a combination of oral and anal sex.

Diary descriptions confirm that sexual activity for these men is at a fairly high level with casual and changing partners. In all, the ten men had 27 separate sexual encounters over the seven days, and some of these were with multiple partners. They describe a regular pursuit of sexual interactions that are fleeting and, at times, spontaneous. The casual roadside or dormitory encounters invoke an image of cruising. Sometimes these encounters were at specific venues, but more prevalently they occurred by just ‘being available’ for men to approach for sex in an on-going and episodic fashion. What happens at these encounters, however, is not random. Certain scripts are generally followed. Sex takes place as the primary event at hand; it is not about the development of an emotional relationship. In some cases, there is insertive and receptive anal sex, but for these respondents it is rare. Only one man described this. The other nine indicated receptive anal and oral sex. Sometimes masturbation was all that took place, depending on the situation and the assessment of the men ‘giving sex’ as to the cleanliness of the visitors. Frequency of sex, in and of itself, is not an HIV issue; but the ways in which safe sex practice is integrated is. The men didn’t mention using condoms in their diaries, but on further query most indicated they hadn’t used them consistently. Some men said they did in some of the sexual encounters, but not regularly. Most often they were not used.

HIV/STI Prevalence and Sexual Risk

Given a situation of regular sexual activity in a highly varied range of contexts between men in Laos, risk for HIV transmission is clearly a significant issue. Such potential risk needs to be placed
within the overall context of HIV prevalence in Laos (and the region). The most recent sero-prevalence shows low-level HIV prevalence, but high levels of STIs amongst the populations sampled. MSM were not included directly in this survey, but sero-surveillance specifically addressing MSM will be conducted later in 2007.

Table 2: HIV/AIDS Situation in Lao PDR

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<th>HIV/AIDS Situation in Lao PDR</th>
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<tr>
<td>The first HIV identified</td>
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<td>The first AIDS identified</td>
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<td>Cumulative number of HIV/AIDS from 1990 CE-6/2005:</td>
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<td>Number of provinces reported</td>
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<td>Number of blood samples</td>
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<td>Number of HIV positive cases</td>
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<td>Number of AIDS cases</td>
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<td>Number of deaths</td>
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*Source: Centre for HIV/AIDS/STI*

Figure 2: Number of New STI Infections Reported by Syndrome and Gender (1-6, 2005)

*Source: Centre for HIV/AIDS/STI*
FHI, working in close collaboration with CHAS, notes in their summary report of their sero-surveillance survey (2005):

- Laos is not immune to an HIV epidemic.
- Consider Savannakhet and Bokeo provinces a warning. Things are changing in Lao PDR, and all provinces are at risk for epidemic spread.
- However, while the number of clients is high enough and the level of condom use is low enough for HIV transmission to occur, the current situation will likely not give rise to a commercial sex epidemic such as the ones in Thailand and Cambodia.
- With the changes in sex work and drug use in Lao PDR, this situation could change.
- Surveillance needs to be done more frequently to catch these changes as they are happening.
- Prevention efforts thusfar are clearly not enough.

The 2005 sero-behavioural survey listed new client turnover amongst female sex workers in the five provinces was an average of 15 clients per 3 months at the highest (Luang Namtha) and eight at the lowest (Bokeo and Champasak). Family Health International analysis of this data suggests that these levels of new client turnover are not high enough to provide the basis for the same sort of explosive epidemic that has been seen in neighbouring countries. On the other hand, it is enough to warrant concern over increased transmission.

**Numbers of Partners**

Based on the details described in the diaries, which cited an average of 2.7 encounters over 7 days (more if we count the number of partners on some of these occasions), the average number of partners over a 3-month period would be greater than 30. This is more than double the highest number of new clients that female sex workers service in the above behavioural survey. Such comparisons, however, should be treated with care. Data for this study was not collected for, nor intended to provide, statistical verification of the exact number of partners. While none of the interactions were with the same partner over the week, it is not known if they will engage in repeat encounters over future weeks. Neither did the study count condom use or seek to break down risk by different forms of sexual activity in this diary format. Nor does the documentation provide an idea of how indicative these figures are of longer periods of time or of other groups of men who have sex with men.

Yet, even taken as a non-random indication of sexual activity, the results merit serious consideration. The diaries, as indication of patterns of sexual activity, suggest there is high potential for HIV to spread within populations of MSM (and potentially further than this subset), assuming condoms are not always used. They represent situations where sex is casual, spontaneous and sometimes with multiple partners in the same encounter. They show a regular change in partners.

The data from the diaries concerning a large number of partners was confirmed in interviews with a far greater number of informants. A considerable number of the gay and *kathoey* men indicated they had more than 10 partners per month, of whom roughly half were new partners. More than a few observed the total number of partners in their lives was likely to number in the
hundreds. Several thought thousands, but there is no way of verifying this (and in all likelihood, is an exaggeration). Nonetheless, for reasons explored in previous chapters, it is certain that a large number of partners is a prevalent characteristic of male-male sexuality for the majority of self-identifying gay men or kathoey in Laos.

Previous studies of sexual risk also show changing partners is a common characteristic of kathoey life. PSI has run programmes with kathoey in Vientiane since late 2002. The 2006 assessment of project outcomes showed that only 30% (123) of kathoey in their sample (n = 412) had taken more than 8 casual partners over a 6-month period. Thus, one might conclude that many kathoey, in fact, do not have high levels of new partners. Looking more closely at the data, however, it is obvious that these 123 kathoey had taken a much higher number of partners than 8. 'More than 8' was the highest category that could be ticked in the PSI questionnaire. The data notes that the average across the 412 men was 8.58. In other words, the average for the group of 123 men with more than 8 partners in fact was closer to 21 partners over 6 months – or almost one new partner per week. This is to say that a significant number of men have a significant number of partners, which is not dissimilar to the details collected from many of the informants in study.

Fifty-two percent of participants in the PSI study also had taken one or more boyfriend during the 6-months prior to the survey. Boyfriends and casual partners happen synchronously; one category doesn't replace the other. While virtually all the kathoey (99%) indicated that they had anal sex with young men (casual partners), only just over 50% had had anal sex with their regular partner (boyfriend). It is unclear whether this might be because a large number of men do not have anyone they consider a boyfriend, or because sex and love are somewhat separated.

Roughly a third indicated they always used condoms with either their boyfriends (35%) or their casual partners (30%). Two thirds did not. This is not based on lack of knowledge. Close to 97% knew that condoms prevent HIV and STI transmission. Thus, while not as pronounced as the descriptions in the diaries, the details offered by the PSI survey indicate that there is an on-going situation of rapid change in partners and irregular condom use.

Multiple Partners in Context

It is not enough simply to cite multi-partner sexuality. HIV prevention plans need to consider the context in which sexual interactions occur and the extent to which condoms (and lube) are used as products of larger forces than simple lack of knowledge. Importantly, there is more to sexual interaction than simple bodily or financial exchanges. What emerges in this research is that (unsurprisingly) there are emotional issues at stake, as well.

The key point is that most male-male sexual relations are shaped by contingent circumstances. There is a constant search for partners and a veritable kaleidoscope of possible unions: kathoey looking for appealing lads; gay men looking for short or long-term lovers; ‘full’ men looking for attention, sex and money. Throughout urban and rural Laos, these dynamics play themselves out on a nightly basis. It is not always predictable what the outcomes will be: who will find partners, under what circumstances, and in what venues. While perhaps not surprising
to those who work in HIV programmes, its relevance remains central to how HIV prevention initiatives are imagined for MSM in Laos. For it is precisely a comprehensive understanding of the expectations of the partners involved that is crucial to effective programming.

Sex is frequently a highly opportunistic event. This is a central element of the ways many sexual encounters take place. Sex between two men is the product of fleeting encounters; two men with desire for sex will meet up in specific social settings and sex may take place in any number of locales:

- Guest houses are perhaps the most common venue in the towns, but many other locations are also possible depending on availability of funds, transport and time.
- Bathrooms at nightclubs
- Empty dorm rooms, or discretely under blankets if the dorms are occupied by other students
- Public areas, such as dark corners of parks, behind buildings, roadsides or fields in rural areas
- Friend’s houses or occasionally one’s own home

Sex between *kathoey*/gay men and ‘full’ male partners most typically takes place very soon after meeting in either entertainment places or just public spaces. As shown in the vignettes and the diaries, it is seldom a planned occurrence insofar as either partner necessarily knows each other beforehand or anticipates that sex with this person will take place. Sometimes it is the *kathoey* or gay man who is the active partner in organizing the liaison. At other times, ‘full’ men will seek the opportunity to find and organize sex with a gay or *kathoey* partner. In both events the overwhelming characteristic is the fleeting and uncertain nature of the union. Such opportunistic occasions do not define all relations, but they do characterise the majority. While both parties might well have considered a desire for sex, there is nonetheless uncertainty with regard to who the precise partner will be and the venue in which sex will take place. This haphazard nature of relationships in terms of planning plays a significant part in the extent to which condoms are used.

Multi-partner sex, where two groups of men encounter each other, is also not uncommon. A number of examples were cited of several *kathoey* men having sex with a larger number of *phu bao*. This was not offered as problematic or unwelcome. In keeping with the highly sexualized nature of such relations between *kathoey*s and ‘full’ men in Laos, it was regarded as more ‘exciting’. There may also be more *kathoey*s than ‘full’ men. This, too, poses no problems. The research team was privy to several occasions where young lads ‘enjoyed’ the attention of a larger number of *kathoey*s with no shyness or embarrassment over public sex.

This context of multiple-partner sex fits with the sensibility explained in the previous chapter, where a *kathoey*’s pleasure will be drawn from degrees of interaction with ‘straight’ men. In other words, quantity is not a negative within sexual relations, and a sense of pride is born from the number of men that can be accommodated. We see this in a number of the vignettes. Sometimes it takes on more complex scenarios. One pair of close friends, T and P, work together in a beauty shop.
T, who has long hair and dresses as a woman, was kicked out of his home at a young age for flagrant feminine behaviour and moved to Vientiane to find work. P, too, left home early and went to Thailand where he was first introduced to male-male sex and how much money could be made in Pattaya’s bars. Then he got sick of Thailand and came back to Vientiane. He likes to both give and receive. He has short hair and dresses as a man. T only likes men with large penises, and he will only receive. But while he is feminine in outward dress, his demeanor is not always retiring. Given that T likes watching more than having sex, he will often suggest the phu bao engages with P, rather than with him. There are many permutations. If T is not happy with the size of the man’s penis, he will not allow the man to perform anal sex with him, and instead P becomes an available second choice while he watches. Or at times, he and P will ‘tag team,’ as they put it. If he or P brings a man (or men) to the shop (where T sleeps), he will try to persuade the male to ‘give’ him sex while also receiving from P. As one might imagine, some men baulk at this receptive role and there have been times when T holds the lad down as P performs anal sex. They told us this in a somewhat satisfied manner suggesting, “It is about time a man knew how much anal sex hurts”. Other times, they told us, “The men agree willingly to the joint activities, they like the variety.”

While stories of highly spontaneous and sometimes multiple sexual encounters were common, there are also many relationships that take on more everyday characteristics. Men would find a partner for the evening and go to a guesthouse, much as heterosexual men do with casual female partners (usually commercial sex workers). With Western men, the liaisons were sometimes over a number of days; with Laotian partners, the interactions were limited to hours or perhaps the whole night.

In addition to casual partners, many men referred to having or desiring a boyfriend or faen. Interestingly, the label of ‘boyfriend’ could be applied to someone who a kathoey or gay man loved from a distance, but with whom he never had engaged in a sexual or reciprocated relationship; likewise, it could refer to a partner of two or three sexual encounters that elevates the relationship above the more fleeting casual occurrences which typify much of Laotian male-male sexuality. Men aspire to having permanent partners, but most recognise the potential reality of such hopes is close to zero in any long-term sense (unless it is a foreign partner). Roughly 50% of kathoeys in the PSI study could not classify anyone with whom they had been in the prior six months as a boyfriend.

Significantly, even when achieved, the presence of a ‘boyfriend’ seldom diminished on-going desire for casual partners amongst the men surveyed. The two were separated conceptually and practically. We discussed previously that most men recognized monogamy as physically and emotionally impossible. Boyfriends are often imagined as more regular partners, but also as the recipients of emotional investment. At times, this means sexual engagement is secondary.

More often, sex occurs with new partners in one-off encounters that are about a different form of sexual and emotional exchange than with boyfriends (although here, too, there is a huge range of possible permutations on what constitutes a boyfriend and the type of relationship entailed). With casual partners, sex overshadows anything else. Emotional satisfaction is linked to the number of partners, rather than any one individual. This is the underlying driver. It comes not just from a recognized biological sexual drive (although this is important), but also from the ways in which kathoey (and to an extent gay) identity is premised on an exaggerated sense of sexual pleasure that refracts emotional pleasure through its enactment.
As mentioned, emotional needs take many forms. Having many partners is seen as an achievement; it is an internal benchmark within the social world of kathoeys and gay men. In circumstances where social status is denied on most fronts, criteria for self-worth are recalibrated within forms of male-male sociality. Kathoeys notice, comment and keep tabs on how many partners they and their peers have. This becomes a means by which success and internal status is measured. It reinforces a particular form of social status – one that is heavily sexualized. Having many partners affirms identity, not as a means of civil advocacy based on difference from heterosexual norms that was such a central part of gay activism in the West, but rather one that is fashioned through the availability of ‘straight’ partners.

There is, thus, a range of scenarios, wherein men engage with other men sexually, built around complex modes of social and emotional identification. The ways in which the supposed ‘uncertain’ elements of these interactions enter the equation make formula-driven HIV programmes problematic. At its most basic, men are having sex with other men in diverse settings. There is also enough diversity and lack of certainty about these relationships that gives the men a huge range of possibilities to avoid thinking about HIV protection and to not consistently use condoms. “We do not always use condoms” was the most common answer. “It depends” was the most common explanation.

**Condom Use Depends On....**

There are many reasons that men cite for not using condoms. Some are clearly practical issues; others are more to do with a personal sense of risk.

**Lack of Availability**

This is the most common response. It is also the easiest and perhaps quite legitimately accurate. Given the types of situations already discussed, men do not always prepare themselves with condoms available on their person, “We don’t always know when we will meet someone.” Part of the excitement of sexual encounters is precisely their random occurrence.

A mystique that counteracts the negative perceptions concerning a lack of regular or long-term partners is the potential for a sudden sexual encounter. This excitement is constituted in its unimagined/unplanned occurrence. To always have a condom ready detracts from the spontaneity and excitement. Thus, men simply shrug and say they don’t always have condoms with them.

Another factor is the sometimes multiple sexual encounters; given a number of different partners at one occasion can require more condoms than might have been brought along. At the same time, sex often takes place in locales where condoms might not be close at hand. Guesthouses in Laos do not typically make condoms available, as is common in some countries.
Assessment of Partner

The second most common response is that they can tell which men should or shouldn’t use condoms. These explanatory narratives take several forms.

• Some kathoey and gay men told us they can tell whether their partner is experienced sexually or not. They believe they can examine the foreskin and if it is not widely open then the (young) man is inexperienced and therefore sexually ‘clean’.

• Others enquire about the man’s experience with women. If he has not slept with women then he is deemed to be safe from disease based on the predominant HIV messages that target heterosexual spread. HIV infection amongst MSM has not formed part of any official HIV programming in Laos to date (although small programmes such as those of Burnet Institute, PSI and LYAP do target kathoey and gay men)

• Some kathoey and gay men feel they would not use it with a very attractive partner, as this would spoil the experience. In other cases, if they see no signs of infection after inspecting the penis, then condoms are unnecessary. These rationales parallel those heard in heterosexual situations.

• Some young men feel condoms are unnecessary with kathoey because they have never heard of the possibility of HIV infection through male-male sex. This message has not been part of any mainstream public health campaigns.

Physical Discomfort

A number of kathoey spoke of the pain caused by condoms, and the unnatural feeling. Lube is gradually being introduced as part of targeted projects, but these are still limited in reach and for many men, receptive anal sex is more painful with condom use. Even when they are used, condoms are sometimes removed during intercourse by ‘full’ men, who only partially acquiesce to their use, in order to increase pleasure and hasten ejaculation. Condoms are almost never used for oral sex.

Desire/ Sexual Satisfaction

We have spoken of the deferred pleasure in relationships between kathoey and phu bao. For some kathoey, pleasure comes through acceptance of the male’s sperm, indicating complete ‘possession’. If the male does not ejaculate then the associated sexual pleasure for the kathoey is minimized. It is also reduced if the semen is not received into the body. Masturbation does not constitute ‘having’ the male in the same way as receiving his semen does. Such nuanced pleasures can prevent constant use of condoms.

Some kathoey believe imbibing semen is good for the physique and, in particular, skin quality.

Many men repeat the commonplace rejection: condoms don’t feel natural.
Disagreement Over Their Use

Most commonly we heard that *kathoeys* will leave it up to the insertive partner to take responsibility. It depends whether they have a condom ready, but this was rare because most ‘full’ men surveyed did not seem to care about safety or indicated that condoms were not appealing. Generally, when condoms are used, it is the *kathoeys* or gay men as the receptive partner who suggest their use. This is the likely outcome of programme activities in the urban centres, and was not much spoken about in rural areas.

‘Full’ men will not always acquiesce to condom use. Sometimes the *kathoeys* or gay man can insist. Other times, they don’t and agree to sex without a condom, regarding sex as more important than safety. Some informants indicated there are still foreigners who will offer more money for sex without condoms.

Fatalism

Ideas of permanency (or lack of) profoundly affect male-male relations. *Kathoeys* and gay men are aware that relationships are fleeting. Although not the only means of satisfaction in life, sexual pleasure is elevated as perhaps the most powerful emotional need, most readily available and most central to identity. It is obtainable through brief and highly eroticised encounters usually with young men met in passing. Sex is there for the taking. If condoms are a preventive to the ready consummation of these relationships, then they are ignored. Men told us that at the end of the day condoms are not that important to them. So far, they have not received a degree of relevance in their lives to outweigh the various facets that go towards constructing relationship rewards built around fleeting and spontaneous gratification.

Even after having attended training from targeted projects, some *kathoeys* were frank that they didn’t use condoms. They acquiesce to the young men who ‘don’t’ like condoms. The young men’s attention is more important than their own safety. They said bluntly, “He has something we need, so we will take the chance (*tong dai, yoom sia*). They are scared of rejection. It is not just about physical sexual pleasure – the emotional components of ‘possession’ are equally important. The affirmation provided by sex is greater than the pressure to practice safety. To have sex is intrinsic to identity. If condoms alter this equation, then they are undesirable.

Incorrect Knowledge

Safe sex messages relating to male-male sexuality have not been part of any mass media or mainstream campaign activities reaching a general public anywhere in Laos. Most young men simply do not know about the importance of condoms in anal sex.

*Kathoeys* and gay men in more rural areas felt condoms were not necessary due to the distance from larger urban centres, and the familiarity with one’s partners – they were not strangers. Young men in dormitories who had come from more remote provinces did not know about the importance of condoms, nor how to use them correctly. Some felt they could be re-used or did not need to be removed after sex.

Some informants indicated they take antibiotics regularly and that this protects them against all diseases.
All-male residences are popular places to meet young male sex partners.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

What you notice these days is a kathoey’s tears
But please don’t think that kathoeys will perish
What you notice these days is kathoey’s tears
Do not think that kathoeys will cease to breathe

Purple Tears, Namtha sii muang

The previous chapter highlights HIV risk in prime areas: changing partners and irregular condom use within sexual networks that reach broad sectors of the Laotian populace. Care needs to be taken to understand how these characteristics emerge from a combination of factors, rather than from something intrinsic to male-male sexuality. This research has examined a broad array of issues that relate to men having sex with men. We have attempted to move beyond seeing sexuality simply as being about specific acts. In many reports dealing with HIV in well-known risk groups, there is a strong tendency to focus on marginalized groups through one specific aspect of their identity; if a group is marginalized because of their sexuality, then sexual practice becomes the key marker of difference. We have deliberately chosen to avoid considering male-male sex in Laos simply as an issue of when and where anal sex takes place. This is not to ignore the practical needs of understanding how to address specific risk practices. We return to these issues in the recommendations.

First, however, this chapter makes some concluding remarks concerning MSM in Laos more generally. The situation is changing consistently and certain trends will continue to shape the context in which male sexuality takes its form in Laos over coming years. Reports and studies from countries neighbouring Laos show similarities and differences with the situation in Laos. In turn, they shed light on the need for carefully targeted programmes in Laos.

This study has confirmed regional patterns and found important distinctions in others. For instance, in Cambodia there is a predominance of MSM selling sex and far fewer paying for sex. Catalla et al (2003: 30) note that 66% of MSM informants received money or gifts for sex, whereas only 20% had paid for sex. In Thailand, things are different again, where very few buy or sell sex. A recent study indicated that of a sample of nearly 1,000 MSM, only 4% had paid for sex and 2% had been paid in the prior three months (Mansergh, 2006). Our findings would indicate further variations: that it is regular movement of money from the kathoey or gay men towards ‘full’ men that is of central importance in relationships in Laos. Three further issues stand out.

1. **There is flexibility in forms of MSM identification.**

Laos has a relatively small population, and social sub-groups do not always have the numbers to demarcate themselves in sharp profile. Thus, the separation between kathoeys and men who think of themselves as gay (or short-haired MSM, as in Cambodia) is not always clear
cut. In Laos, it is not sensible to focus only on feminized *kathoey* (and their partners) for the implementation of HIV activities. To date, it has been the easiest way because they are the most identifiable group and it is easy to link *kathoey* sexual practice with high levels of HIV risk. However, the continuum of identification based on a complex array of sexual and gender variables means that MSM do not form neat groups. Nowadays in Laos, there is an increasing number of men who share homo-erotic desire, but only a minority who overtly dress as women. We have discussed the various reasons for this based on external influences and social and psychological factors (increased exposure to global trends, loosening social sanctions, gender conflicts and sexual appeal). While they share homoerotic desire, the options for how one integrates sexuality into a social identity are slowly broadening.

This fluidity was evident when Lao representatives at the MSM workshop differed notably from their regional counterparts in some survey questions. Far more felt one could ‘become’ homosexual through social contact with other homosexuals (only 25% of the Laotians thought this was false compared to 60%-100% from the other countries at the meeting) and notably more Laotian representatives thought that having anal sex with a woman could make you a homosexual. This flexibility appears not only in the opinions of these workshop respondents; the survey data shows a pervasive sense throughout Laos that male homo-eroticism is readily influenced by situation, practice and social contact.

Thus, the idea that sexuality and social identification are evolving, and not immutable, finds fertile ground in Laos. The oft-cited sexual malleability in Asia finds a very clear demonstration, perhaps even more so than in other countries. There are now various positions one can take on the hypothetical continuum that ranges from ‘full’ man to full-fledged *kathoey*. One is less pigeonholed into one of these two forms of social identification than in previous years. Gay identity is recently emerging as a central node, but it too is not an alternative catch all. Men position themselves as ‘none of the above’ as much as they feel they belong to one of these (now) three social categories. Any sexual health programmes need to operate outside, as well as within, these boxes.

2. The social and sexual fabric readily accommodates gender disparity, but does so in specific ways.

Large numbers of Laotian men will at some point in their lives have same-sex relations. Men physically enjoy each others company, and the provision of money provides an instrumental cause for sex to take place in diverse settings. This challenges the preference for neatly bounded target groups within much HIV intervention work. It also maintains focus on the broader social context of same-sex practices. Unlike in Thailand, very few Laotian men choose to have surgery to become women. In part, this is from lack of opportunity, but it is also based on the prevailing ways that the social order has found to integrate alternative sexualities. These remain powerful determinants of same-sex sexuality in present day Laos. Thus, while in the past loving men has
implied a feminized *kathoey* category, this has not meant *kathoeys* simply become alternative versions of women. Instead, it entails a complex set of nested negotiations that still structure male-male relations between ‘full’ men and either gay or *kathoey* partners.

- Firstly, we see various ways that male bodies are assimilated into same-sex relations. ‘Full’ men seldom imagine they are having sex with women, as is the case sometimes in Thailand and Cambodia. One element of the appeal is that ‘full’ men themselves become emotionally feminized. Nor does the *kathoey* seek to become a woman physically.

- This leads to various strategies to diminish confrontational aspects of two biologically male bodies within a relationship that still seeks some heterosexual elements. As discussed, it is widely perceived *kathoeys* should not have, or not make evident, their own physical arousal. In turn, lack of sexual climax leads to the internalised and widely held belief that *kathoeys* (and homoerotically inclined men, in general) have more sexual desire than others.

- In turn, this promotes very specific forms of relationships and integration within a wider social order. Possession and competition are key elements of *kathoey* and gay sociality and structure, the manner in which sexual relations are engaged with ‘full’ men (*phu bao*). Desire for money, sexual variety and emotional support are key elements of the *phu bao*’s motivation. This creates four major characteristics of male-male sexuality: short term relationships, frequent one-off sexual encounters, a constant search for new partners, and the commonplace presence of money as the facilitating factor.

3. **Emotional elements of intimate relationships cannot be ignored.**

Despite often being ignored or downplayed, emotional exchange is often crucially important in how people position themselves in a sexual relationships and, in turn, how much importance is given to safer sex. So long as condoms are seen as a barrier to intimate contact, then they will oftentimes be rejected.22

In some instances, emotional underpinnings might be minimal; but they are never unimportant. For example, young men are the most desirable partners for most *kathoeys* not just because of the physical appeal, but also because they allow the assimilation of key social structures – age hierarchy and the notion of the older taking care of (and taking advantage of) the younger. Even in the most casual anonymous sex, there evidently is a high degree of emotional satisfaction for the gay or *kathoey* man (usually emerging from a sense of ‘possession’). We see how young men, at times, feel overwhelmed by the emotional displays of their *kathoey* partner, both relishing the attention and finding it uncomfortable. We see how notions of love are central to different men’s understanding of their future. Men’s and women’s love differs. Marriage and a family remain a key touchstone for future security in Laos.

*Kathoeys* are denied the possibility of long-term love in most situations. This does not mean they give up on emotional needs. Rather, they become expressed in specific ways. Desire is strongly structured and shaped by social expectations and demands. We see the quest for emotional and sexual satisfaction becomes concentrated on multiple partners. Love and desire become

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22 A conclusion also reached in studies of HIV prevalence amongst MSM in Thailand, where Mansergh et. al. (2006: 748) explain lack of condom use: “It may be the case that many men either had not personalized that information or that other factors outweighed the fear of becoming HIV infected (e.g., physical or emotional intimacy)”.

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interwoven in the need to constantly have a ‘new’ lover. This is not just about physical pleasure: many kathoey find pleasure in ‘possessing’, rather than imagining longer-term exchange. This is the only option available.

Love, in a sexualized form, therefore becomes a perpetual quest for many kathoey and gay men, and the importance of a temporary emotional connection overrides the need for safety. Because a high number of emotional needs become condensed into fleeting sex, if condoms pose a threat to the possibility of consummating the relationship, they will be rejected - the emotional connection is more important. This creates a very dangerous dynamic for HIV spread. It is not to say it cannot be changed, but there remain significant obstacles to attaining increased condom use.

Of course, these descriptions do not hold in every sexual relationship. Men are increasingly using condoms in response to the targeted programmes as the PSI study shows. Nonetheless, there are widespread indications that men choose non-safe sex on many occasions - even those who have been part of specific trainings. These above issues need careful integration into programmes to improve condom use further. How men ‘feel’ about their relationships and to what extent condoms are antithetical to this needs to be addressed.
Chapter 8

Recommendations

Whether enough men can be reached, and be reached effectively, to lessen HIV spread will depend on the commitment of governmental authorities, NGOs and donors to work in ways that acknowledge male-male sex exists in wide sectors of the country’s society. Strategies must also fit readily (and discretely) within everyday life in both rural and urban centres. Interventions will require appropriate sensitivity.

The general pervasiveness of male-male sex creates difficulties in planning targeted programmes; however, it also provides advantages in that people can be gradually empowered through broad programmes that target youth who are in their high school and late adolescent years. This research found same-sex practice is widely accepted or tolerated (although it is seldom made public). This acceptance offers opportunities to build health messages into the way sexual relations are engaged that do not face overwhelming challenges of prohibitive social denial and individual disavowal. It does not mean that changing high levels of sexual risk is easy or automatic. It simply means that it can and should be done. It also means MSM can and should be included in the planning and implementation of these programmes.

Sexual Safety

• Despite levels of casual acceptance, stigma and discrimination still exist and remain a constraint particularly in more formal sectors of society, ie in workplaces and government circles. Many men do not feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality. Preference for male-male sex is not something that can be rehabilitated or removed. Some sectors, however, still see this as the ideal ‘solution’. Important work needs to be done in the conceptualisation and instigation of campaigns to ensure they are about empowering safe choices, and not about surveillance and control. It will possibly require training different government sectors in approaches that endorse fundamental rights for MSM. In all cases, anonymity needs to be ensured in programme activities.

• As indicated in the preceding report, many men have sexual experience at an early age. Sometimes this happens under circumstances that are not voluntary in workplace, domestic, or more haphazard situations. This is a major issue in terms of adequate HIV knowledge and safety. Protection of child rights needs careful inclusion in both the planning and operational stages of safe sex education. Anonymous referral and counseling services for victims of sex-based violence should be organized specifically for MSM.

Target Audience for Initiatives

Diversity is a chief characteristic of male-male sexuality, and programmes need to reach men in a number of different settings. There are two general groupings that need attention:
**Men who self-identify as homo-erotically inclined.** These are the easiest to reach. The 2006 Global Fund proposal recognizes this and has targeted their activities to only self-identifying men. This group includes both effeminate and non-effeminate men who are open about their sexual desire for other men. They form what Therapeutics Research, Education, and AIDS Training in Asia (TREAT Asia) describes as a core group with a large number of sexual relations. It is logical to focus on this general collective of men, although it must be recognized that they do not form a homogenous group in terms of appearance, occupation, or social networks. In addition, there is a growing divide between gay and kathoey (although not to the extent found in other countries). There are also men who remain highly discrete in their sexual activity, making it known to only a few. Care should be taken, however, not to simply approach self-identifying men as a singular target group sharing the same concerns. Each person has a rich and complex life that needs to be recognised in both interpersonal and programmatic terms.

**An amorphous group of men who enter into sexual relations with the above men.** While there is some sexual interaction between men who openly identify as MSM, the majority of sexual activity takes place with men who do not identify in this manner. It is crucial that this second group is reached, as well. It is clear that condom use is always (to some extent) a negotiation and agreement between two people. Both parties need to be incorporated into HIV initiatives. This group, at its most general, comprises young single men (*phu bao*). Large numbers of these men have sex with other men in contemporary Lao society, whether for experimentation, financial gain or situational opportunity. They do not see this as an important part of their everyday identity. This research finds that this group of men needs urgent and targeted attention in terms of sexual health and HIV programmes relating to male-male sexuality. It is not enough to see them simply as partners. They have almost never been specifically targeted for this behaviour (PSI has run one workshop for partners of *kathoey* in Vientiane).

A third group consists of the men who do not disclose their preference for male-male sex. They very often marry, but continue to have relations with other men. This group can only be reached through very general campaign activities that need to elevate same-sex behavior alongside heterosexual behavior as key modes of HIV transmission.

**Style of Information Outreach Initiatives**

HIV activities must reach men in ways that will make a difference to the way sex is practiced. A combination of approaches is necessary.

- **Peer group awareness-raising and support is the most logical and effective amongst known networks of self-identifying men.** PSI, the Lao Youth Aids Prevention Programme (LYAP) and Burnet all have constructive outreach programmes. Peer group activities need to include the steadily increasing number of *kathoey* and gay men, including new cohorts of young teenagers still in institutional settings such as high school and vocational colleges. Peer group activities need to recognize that there is a growing split between gay and *kathoey*. While not yet a prohibitive divide, it does create some obstacles for programmes that seek to create close personal connections between peers and their networks.

- **To date, sexual partners (*phu bao*) are seldom reached by targeted activities. New venue-specific programmes are required.** Much more attention needs to be focused on this group,
rather than relying on kathoey or gay men to instigate condom use. The more both parties are insistent on condom use, the more likely it is they will be used. Our research found that this group is large enough in both rural and urban areas to warrant broad-scale and blanket targeting in high schools and vocational colleges. These men cannot be adequately identified simply through partner-tracing approaches.

- **Approach strategies should include peer-group activities and more large-scale dissemination campaigns.** In the first instance, dormitories in large towns/cities attached to vocational colleges should be the first level of activities. Peer group activity and more general health promotion initiatives are relevant here, although single men are reticent to discuss same-sex behavior in front of peers. It should be included as part of broader sexual health STI material covering hetero-and homosexual behavior.

- **Sexual health programmes at high schools should also be instigated.** School curriculum should have more careful material on sexual health, and seek to build awareness and safe-sex confidence in male-male as well as male-female relationships. This material also needs to address issues of masturbation and male sexual health to counter the existing misconceptions underpinning current beliefs concerning male physiology and the nature of semen exchange in kathoey-male relations. Pilot programmes in certain schools and districts nearer the Thai border are recommended.

- **Programmes can be age-specific.** The vast majority of men who either identify as preferring male-male sex or who alternatively have sex with these men are in their late teens or early-mid twenties. This means programmes can be targeted through activities that reach these age groups, organized with the assistance of the Lao Youth Union or other NGO/government collaborations. This targeting can be venue-specific; as mentioned for ‘full’ men, this might be high schools or vocational colleges (and/or their dormitories). Sexual health centres offer a growing possibility for site-specific counseling, prevention and care activities for kathoey or gay men attending these venues (Vientiane has one male health centre run by PSI, but there are plans for others in Luang Prabang and possibly other cities). Popular entertainment venues are another possibility. Networks exist already for reaching gay men and kathoey in the larger cities through existing programmes and also for youth, in general, through NGO and other youth union activities.

- **Activities can also be media-specific.** For young people, sexuality and fashion are closely entwined. Currently, explicit sex movies are available all over the country and are widely watched by young men and women. New model mobile phones also circulate sex movies. Material should be produced that dovetails with the popular culture appeal of contemporary sexuality and includes alternative expressions of sexuality. In other words, some activities could follow basic health promotion practices; other activities should engage more emotive connections to current fashion trends. Internet websites are a popular means of finding male partners, usually from countries outside Laos, but not exclusively. New technologies have their place in some urban circumstances in health activities in Laos and should not be overlooked.

- **Men who do not disclose their sexuality, who tend to be older and often married, can not be reached by specific targeted activities if they have moved beyond the age of schooling or vocational college.** But there are venues where some of these men organize sexual interactions, such as certain bars and meeting places. Here material and activities...
should address not just the men offering sexual services in these venues, but also married men or otherwise sexually non-disclosed ‘clients’ who attend. Again, careful government co-operation is required to maintain open channels in this context.

Content of Messages/Activities

- Standard health promotion approaches need to raise awareness of male-male sexuality and its role in HIV transmission. While a human rights/empowerment approach that seeks to directly challenge discrimination is not suggested, health programmes do need to tackle the pervasive silence around male-male sex in current HIV programming. This research finds that male-male sex is common, pervasive and remarkably everyday in its occurrence (in particular where large groups of males congregate). Programme initiatives need to recognize and reflect this situation. Health material needs to elevate same-sex sexuality to a more prominent level of discussion. This will need whole-hearted and committed Government co-operation.

- Broad-based initiatives should address male sexual health, in general, and be utilised in forums that will reach large numbers of young unmarried men. Schools and community programmes can include this type of initiative. HIV material and male-male sex should be included as part of overall material dealing with male-female sexuality and reproductive health.

- Material addressing (or used within peer groups of) kathoeys and gay men needs to focus more carefully on emotional elements of relationships and how these should be incorporated within intimate sexual encounters so they are also safe. Many campaigns have sought to eroticise condoms, and this is important. What is also needed is a frank appraisal of how intimacy sometimes takes the place of safety, rather than alongside it. This has been a strong finding in our research and needs concerted attention.

- Material that addresses either the kathoey/gay nexus or that of the ‘full’ male lifestyle needs to concretely engage in the reality of frequent and fleeting sexual relations. This is the staple of commercial sex-oriented material, but the situation of MSM is not the same. It is not enough to simply adopt a public health approach that focuses exclusively on individual behaviour (use/non-use) of condoms. The social context in which it takes place and the identifying characteristics of ‘why’ sexual relations take place can create sense of recognition and, thereby, relevance. Many men recognize that relationships are transient and casual. This is usually forwarded as the reason why condoms are seldom used, both due to lack of foresight, and the fact that not using condoms provides a means of introducing intimacy and emotional contact where elsewhere there is little to be found. Any initiative to change this behaviour needs to precisely target these dynamics: that it is the casual and transient nature of the relationships that make it even more imperative that condoms be used. At present, they offer more reasons to avoid their use than to include it.

- MSM must identify with the content of the messages. There is a profoundly social context to how male-male relations take place. This needs to be part of any material which addresses risk in this context, so that MSM identify. It is clear that MSM as a category is so broad that devising material which creates a sense of individual recognition is not easy. Yet, if practical situations and emotional dynamics are accurately reflected, men can be drawn into relating personally to the messages. To do this will inevitably entail collaborative programme activities that involve men who are part of same-sex networks in Laos.
• Correct condom and lube use needs to be included in all material, even that for ‘full’ men. Awareness of and familiarity with anal sex safety needs gradual and constant introduction into the wide context in which male-male sex takes place.
REFERENCES


### ANNEX I

#### Summary Details of Research Participants

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Notes:  
- Identity = TG - kathoey, gay – gay, male- ‘full’ man  
- 1st MSM = Age at first male-male sex  
- How = type of first sexual experience with another man  
- Roles = preferred sexual role I – insertive, R – receptive*  
- Partners = partners include, L – Laotian, F, Westerner (farang), W – woman  
- Age = Preferred/typical age of partner, Y – younger, O – older  
- Money = overall pay (loss) more than receive (gain)  
- Condom = use more often than not, Y- yes, N – no.  
- B = previously gay or kathoey but recently married  
- H = hand  
- O = oral  
- A = anal  

*Receptive in the context of oral sex indicates receiver of sperm.
ANNEX II

Vignettes of Sites Where Sex Takes Place

City Night Club

U (18 years old)

One day, I and four kathoey friends were wondering how we could find boys for sex. Suddenly, a friend of mine had an idea where to find some guys (phu bao). He suggested Hiway [a club in Vientiane]. It is where we all wanted to go because there are many young men there. I think the owner of the place is gay, too.

We went there around 9:30 pm. The place was full of customers. The majority were teenage boys, teenage girls and a few kathoey. There were 7 teenagers on a table next to ours. There were only two guys that looked good; in other words ‘worth a look’. Time had passed - my friend and I got a bit drunk. I love a good time, and when I get drunk, I dance, sing, and greet people from different tables. Therefore, it is not surprising that I could get a lad that night. I raised my glass to the person who caught my eye – I was interested in him. I did not know that he was interested in me, too. Five minutes, later he walked to me and asked, “Who did you come with, young lady? Shall we dance? At that moment, I was so happy and my friends were jealous - they just said: “Excellent, go ahead U”. I danced with him then I felt like I need to go to the restroom, which is on the other side of the room next to the counter.

It was a bit dark in the rest room. The guy followed me to the restroom. He pushed me against the door and asked, “Do you want to suck?” I did not know what to say as I was so excited. Then the boy pulled me to him and bit my mouth, while I touched his penis, then slowly pulled down the zip. At the time his penis was fully erected. I gave him oral sex immediately, until I was tired. Then the boy told me to take off my trousers and turn my back to him. To make sure it hurt less, I spat saliva onto my anus and the boy’s penis. He then penetrated into my anus. It hurt a bit, but I had to be patient because I like it. The boy then pulled backward and forward rhythmically and reached orgasm within about 5 minutes. I was a bit tired, but I was proud.

I told the boy that we should leave the restroom one by one otherwise people would know. I came out from the rest room first and later he came out. When I came back to my table, my friends were teasing me and asked: “How was it? Did it feel good? Big penis?” I did not know what to say, so I said, “Nothing happened”. After returning from the restroom, he went back to his table and pretended as nothing happened. I continued drinking beer, later it was time to close the night club. We all went home. That night I slept at home. I could not sleep as I was sill thinking about what happened that night. I would not forget about it. I think if I have a chance I will go again to the place with my friends. But I am not sure whether I could be lucky as I was that night. Thank you Hiway - for the happiness and pleasure I got that night, which I would never forget.
Sauna, Vientiane

K (28 years old)

One day, I drank beer, felt drunk and very tired. When I got up the next morning, I went to work, as usual. Usually I work from 9 am -9 pm, except Sat, from 9am-5 pm. On that day, I planned that after work I would go to a sauna in Wat Chan. I thought it would make me feel better. After work, I went to the sauna. When I arrived there I saw a foreigner. He was probably over 40 years old, tall, fair, straight nose, not fat and not thin. In fact, I think his build is as good as an actor. At that moment, I found him very attractive, but I kept my feeling hidden. He was also interested in me because he looked at me very often. It seemed like both of our hearts were telling each other that we want to have a relationship. (I almost forgot to say - he is an Australian). He worked with Nam Theun [a large dam construction site], and can speak Lao a little. After paying for the fee of the sauna, I went to the male dressing room to get changed for the sauna. Suddenly the man walked up to me and asked, “What is your name?” It was like we just first met. He also asked, “Who are you coming with? Where do you work now?” I answered his questions straight away and I was having irregular heart beats.

After changing my clothes and saying hello to a few people, I walked to the sauna room. Then the man followed me and sat right next to me. He stroked my arm and moved up and down, like he was telling me that he wanted to have sex with me. Unfortunately, there were plenty of people in the sauna room, so we could not do anything more than this. Otherwise, other people would see. Ten minutes later I felt that it was too warm, so I went out of the sauna room for a break. Soon after, the man came out and sat next to me and asked, “Would you like anything to drink?” I said no thanks. Then he bought two small bottles of soymilk and gave one to me. My friends were jealous and said, “How come only you two have a drink!!” Then we talked until 7 pm. The man asked me to go to his house so that we could get to know each other better.

He came with a bicycle, so I was on my motorcycle riding slowly and followed him to his place. I asked him, “How many people live in this big house?” “I live with friends, but they are not in today,” he replied. After entering the house, I sat in the living room for 10 minutes. Then the man said to me, “Let me give you a tour of my house”. He walked me to different rooms and finally to his bedroom. Then what I was expecting happened. When I came to his room, he hugged me and kissed me on the neck and I just let him do it to me. We eventually had sex that night. I gave him oral sex and anal sex. After having sex, we went out for dinner. After dinner, we went back to his house and I stayed over night there. I had six orgasms and the man had only four that night.

We were in a relationship for over a year. After his project finished, he went back home. We are slowly losing contact, but I have been thinking of him since then.
After finishing the interview for the research with Dr Chris at around 7 pm, I and another volunteer needed to drop off the men who had been talking with us. Santi left already. W, K, O and I were about to leave. Suddenly, K and O said, “Hang on, there are handsome boys living in his house”, the one just opposite the shop where we were for the interview. Four of us went to the house. P, who knew the boys there, asked: “Hey guys, anybody in the house?” There were two students in the house. The first person was tall, fair and good looking. He wore red Jet. “Here we are, come upstairs, ladies”, he replied.

W looks like a woman. He has very long hair (everyone thought that he is a girl), he was especially enthusiastic about the boy. W showed interest immediately, and wanted to be his girlfriend by talking to him and asking him many different things while touching him and hugging him. But the man seemed a bit shy and refused, saying, “It is impossible to have sex at the first meeting. I have not done this before.” He told W to stop hugging, kissing and trying to persuade him to have sex. But W did not give up, and said to him, “I like you and I want to have pleasure with you”. The man laughed. Other men looked over from a distance and said, “What a confident person! How can she be so cocky!”

There was a boy staying in the house. He had just recovered from sickness and was sleeping in a corner of the room. He laughed and said, “Just do it, don’t be shy. Go ahead. Today I couldn’t. Next time if you want me, I will join you. Today I’ve just recovered from fever; also, my penis is small”. Suddenly, K approached him and said, “I like small one. Let me touch it”. Finally the man let K touch his penis until it became hard. The man has dark and smooth skin, but he is not fat. He looks ok, but he is not as handsome as the one W was flirting with. In general, it seems he has good personality.

W was trying to touch the man’s penis, but he kept refusing. W was about to get angry and said, “Let’s go home. We are better going to the student dorm.” W was about to remove his hand from touching and kissing the man, but the man held W’s arms and took W’s hand to touch his penis, which was fully hard and ready to have sex. W decided to stay. She said to turn off the light first, and then held the guy’s penis for a while before giving him oral sex. After that, W stood up and took off the boy’s underwear and sat on the boy’s penis without using condom and lubricant. W sat and moved with pleasure and the man’s hands were on W’s waist, pulling up and down.

K gave oral sex to the boy who was laying in the corner of the room. After a while, the boy said, “I am afraid it would be sex for free, stop it. Give me something in return before you continue doing it”. K said, “OK, but let’s finish first.” The boy let K continue with pleasure. When K saw W having sex with such pleasure, he stood up and asked if he could touch the man’s penis while they were doing it. But W said, “No! Don’t come close, it is about to finish”. The boy who K had been with having sex said, “K, please come back and finish this first.” They were both watching W having sex.

O was the watchdog, keeping by the door downstairs. We were afraid that their roommates would come, as they had not arrived from school yet. When O was talking on the phone, two
boys came to the house. O kept talking to the boys so that W and K could finish what they had started before the two boys went upstairs.

When W was done (the man had come), W told K to come and touch the man’s penis, as he had wanted to. While K touched the penis, W gave the man oral sex and said, “Boy!!!!!!! Very big and long as well”. After a while, the man put K’s hand off from his penis. I turned on the light. The man was shy and turned his face down to the floor, he refused to look at me. Before saying good bye to the man, W said, “From now on, I am your wife. You have to love me. I’ll come to see you again on Saturday.” The man said, “Please give me money...10,000 or 20,000 kip for food.” But W only had 5,000 kip in his purse. W gave him all he had and said, “Next time, I give you more. See you again on Saturday. I’ll come and pick you up.”

K did not reach orgasm. He only had oral sex and touched. The man did not ask K for any money, but K gave him 10,000 kip, and said, “See you again. I’m going home now, thank you”. W and K were satisfied that day. I and O were happy, too, to see our friends got boys.

I-P Bar

K and friends (mid 20s)

I-P Bar looks like a bar, apart from the fact it is a converted house. It is for drinking and listening to music, but it is special because in this bar there are students from neighbouring technical colleges who come and give sexual services to men with high sexual desire or lust (tanha sung), especially kathoey, gays, or older women and others. Whoever wishes can come and use the service from young students.

I-P Bar is on a small road next to a polytech college. When we go there at night, we can see coloured lighting in front of the bar, and as we walk in there is a big gate. If it is late at night, Mr P will close the gate and keep music soft so that it does not disturb the neighbours.

In the bar, there is a big round counter with four to five tall seats. The seats are for boys, while they are waiting for customers. The seats are located on the walk way so that it is easy for customers to take the boys on the way to the bedrooms. If customers want to sit outside, then there are big sofas for six to seven people. From the seats, customers can easily observe the boys coming in and going out.

In the main room downstairs there are about six tables with three to four seats, put at different corners of the room. Along the corridor on the right-hand side there are bedrooms for customers who do not want to take the boys out. Upstairs there are also bedrooms, like bedrooms in guesthouses, but no bathroom. In the room there is a double bed, a TV, small towels, and condoms. There are also sex movies - male-to-male or male-to-female, depending on the request of the customers.

I went to I-P bar with three friends; we planned to have sex with the boys there. We arrived there around 11:30 pm. I was shy and so were my friends. We were not brave to enter the bar but since we were there already we had to go in. We took the table at a dark corner because all of us were so shy. Suddenly, I-P, the bar owner, came to sit with us and asked, “Anybody you like? Please feel free to call anyone to join you for drink or to have a conversation, or if you do
not want, that is fine”. We told him that we had not found anyone we liked yet, and I-P went back to the counter.

I asked my friends if they found anyone attractive. All of them said, “Not yet.” Time passed. I decided to walk to the counter and asked I-P to give us two boys who were confident to talk. In a few minutes, two young men came to sit with us. They were not too handsome, but OK. I was persuading L and J to sit next to them and give them hugs, but my friends refused. After having conversation for a while, L looked interested in a lad who just came in. L asked me to get this fellow for him, so I walked to the counter and told I-P. Soon after that the boy came to sit with us. He was a good-looking person, looked better than the others. After drinking five beers, I told my friends please decide whether to have sex or not, as I am now feeling tired. Then L, N and J each took a young man with them. Me, I did not have any because I was not in the mood for sex. At the time, there were only two rooms available at the bar, so we let L and N have the rooms. J and I were at the table waiting outside. While we were talking, and getting to know the man with us, three older kathoey came to the bar. They were around 35-40 years old. Also, two foreigners came in with a Lao man. They sat at the counter. I-P did the same thing that he did with us - talked to the customers and went back to the counter telling boys to join them. Later, the young men working there brought their beer and joined the customers at their table.

About 30 minutes later, L and N came out from the rooms. What it told from their faces was that they were happy with the sex they had. Next was J’s turn to take the room downstairs. When J left for the room, three more young lads came in and sat at the counter. One of the boys was good-looking, tall, thin, with a clear and smiling face. As L and N saw him, they were very interested in him. L told me to get the boy for him. After sitting with the boy around 20 minutes, L took him to a room. Later J came out off the room and told me that the boy had a big penis and he was not brave enough to have anal sex with him, only masturbation.

While we were waiting for L, a Lao man around middle age went to a bedroom with the boy who J had just had sex with. I could not believe that the young man still had the energy. L came out off the room with a happy face. L took a lot of pictures while they had sex. When everything was done, we paid and went back home to sleep. The young man costs 50,000 kip or 100,000 kip for the sex. Fee for the room was 50,000 kip for short-time - not all night. L paid 150,000 kip for the two boys, and 100,00 kip for using the bedroom twice. J paid 100,000 kip for the boy and 50,00 kip for the room. N spent 50,00 kip for the room and 50,000 kip for the boy.

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**The Fountain: Vientiane**

**M (23 years old)**

Nampoo, the fountain, has been there since the war time. It is located in the centre of town, crowded by people and entertainment places. So many people hang around at Nampoo. Now it is a dating place for kathoey or gays. It is the place where they look for partners and customers. Before the revolution, this place was known as a place where kathoey and foreigners mingle, so it is not surprising if this practice continues. Also there are restaurants serving Western food in the area, and foreigners are often come by. Therefore, kathoey often go there to look for foreign partners. There are different types of kathoey going there: kathoey dressing female, kathoey with male dress, gay with female characteristics, and gay. Each night there are around
10 people. They are around 15-25 years old, but sometimes we can see old kathoey who are approximately 45-50 years old. They come around 7 p.m. and leave around 10 p.m. They sit and chat with each other, or some just walk around.

When there are foreigners walking past, kathoeys will greet them: “Hello! So handsome, I go with you, OK?” If the foreigners reply, they would then agree on a price before leaving to the foreigner’s guesthouse or to a dark place where noone could see. On average, there are about two foreigners per night coming to get partners from Nampoo. The foreigners could be 15-70 years old, but mostly old persons. The kathoey could get money from 5-100 USD. There are teenagers 15-25 years old, and Indian people also come to this place. The teenagers look for kathoey for sex because they can get some money from kathoey. For the Indian, I can not tell what they are doing there. They often stay amongst kathoey. This still happen these days.

One night, after finishing work at the beauty salon, I went back to my room, took a shower, and got dressed. Then I walked out for a rice soup at the shop in front of my flat. Almost every night, I hang around with friends at Nampoo. It takes five minutes from my place to Nampoo. I sat on a stone table, the one near Le Provencal restaurant. I saw two friends of mine: Noi and Jai (kathoey). They were deep kissing with two foreigners, and beside them there was a foreigner. I walked up to them without any hesitation and was thinking that I want to have sex with those guys. The foreigners were still young, around 23-29 years old. One of them could speak Thai. They were fair and tall men. As soon as I reached their table, I joked with the other kathoey: “You go away, ugly people”. I sat down next to the person who did not have a partner and greeted him: “Hello! How are you? You are handsome”. I stroked his body and kissed him straight away. After a while we moved to their guesthouse near by, close to the Cultural Hall. I did not know which guesthouse. There were only me and the three foreigners. The other two kathoey were not asked to join us. I don’t know why. Maybe they were ugly or because I am more beautiful than they are.

Before going to the room, I had to talk to the staff at the guesthouse because according to the guesthouse rules, it is not permitted for kathoey to come up to the room with the guests. I said to him that we won't do anything, it is just for chatting. This matter was resolved. As soon as I entered the room, I kissed and hugged. One foreigner was looking for something in his bag, then I saw him pull out a bag of cannabis. Oh my God!, they smoke cannabis. I was sitting on the edge of the bed. The room was full of smoke. It was smelly and I felt diseased. When they were in the mood, they walked to me, kissed, and hugged. They took off all their clothes, and so did I. It seemed we did not know the word “shy.” I did everything for them - oral sex, masturbation - until they all ejaculated. Their penises are incredibly big, and I could not even put on a condom. I kept trying, but the condoms tore. Finally, I managed to put on a condom for the penis, but it could not enter my anus because it was too big.

After finishing, I took a shower, got dressed and left. They gave me 20 USD, but I told the one who could speak Thai that I do not want money; I only want to have sex. He walked me down. I was thinking about the money, so I asked him for the money. This time he gave me only 10 USD and walked upstairs. I did not remember what I was thinking at the moment. I gave the money to the staff at the guesthouse, but asked him to give me 20,000 kip for noodle soup. I looked at the clock, and it was 1:20 a.m. Oh my God, from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m.! When coming downstairs, I felt sleepy, so I went back to my room and did not go anywhere else.
**X District**

**E (28 years old) and K**

X is a district located in a rural area in North Laos. There are many visitors going there to enjoy the natural environment.

E is a *kathoey*, and he owns a house in X district. It is off on its own in a paddy field, isolated from others. It is about 500 meters away from the river bank. Every day, both *kathoey* and students come to his house to watch movies and listen to music. So it is easy for E to have sex with the guys who are at the nearby secondary school. The school is not far from E’s house. I heard that many students from remote areas stay in the dorm at the school. In the evening, boys around 15-19 years old came to E’s house to watch movies and listen to music without worrying about neighbours because E’s house is quite remote.

E has been interested in boys since he was young. He often takes the opportunity to flirt with the young men by treating them with alcohol, beer and snake, and this eventually ends with sex. E said, “Sometimes I have to pay, but sometimes I don’t. If boys really want to have sex, then it is free or, if I need to pay, it is not more than 20,000 kip. Sometimes it is only 2,000 kip for cigarettes and then they agree to have sex. Other *kathoey* in X district - around six people - often come to the house day or night. Some *kathoey* are from the town – they come across the river to visit E’s house. The purpose is, of course, to look for students who want to know and try new things. *Kathoey* can get men every time they go to E’s house. E introduces *kathoey* to the young men and tells them why they are there.

Surprisingly, the boys seem to be very much interested in *kathoey*; it looks like they are always waiting to meet and try new things. After the sunsets and they have dinner, there are match-making sessions between *kathoey* and whichever young men have come to visit, and then sex. The couple can have sex wherever they want: some are upstairs, some are downstairs, some in the bush, on the field, at the backyard, behind the chicken hut or in the garden. This is common practice in this house. It is mainly *kathoey* and young men who know about this. They just tell their friends from the village, or friends from other villages. They can come to the house whenever they want to have sex.

Sometimes during school break, students go back home and the match-making is not so easy. One night, I visited E’s house when I was in on a visit from Vientiane. When we went to the house, E walked around the village, passing shops. When E saw boys, he told them, “Do not forget to come to my house tonight. We will have some drink. Also ask your friends to come along, too. I have many friends come by.” “That is all E needs to do. In the evening after dinner, five young men came to the house and they knew that there will be sex. Several *kathoey* had come with me and were busy putting on make-up in order to make themselves look more attractive. Then the guys and *kathoey* had drinks to boost their mood and their confidence. When everyone got a bit drunk, there was match-making. That night, people had sex in the middle of the room: some couples had masturbation, some had oral sex, and others had anal sex. Those who did not have partners were clapping and cheering. Their faces showed that they also have the mood, but they needed to cover it up because it could not be helped - there were less boys (4) than *kathoey* (7).
The couples then had some kind of competition: Who would be the first to reach orgasm? In one couple, the kathoey was tired so he asked another kathoey for help; two kathoey with one boy or three kathoey with two boys. This was when it took time for boys to ejaculate. They kept taking turns having sex. And kathoeys who did not have partners did the cheering. Surprisingly, none of the boys was shy. They were even brave to show their penises to everyone in the room, and they were happy to let the kathoeys take turns touching them and giving oral sex to them. After having orgasm, the boys put on their clothes and went back home without asking for any money. This is usual for boys in X district. If they do ask for money, they would not ask for a lot; only a small amount of money.

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**Restroom in a University Dormitory**

R (25 years old)

When I was a 2nd year student in Vientiane, a friend of mine organised his birthday party. He is a student at university, too. He is three years older than I am. So I called him I-Kham. He is also kathoey or gay. He used to be a teacher in Luang Prabang and was sent to university for upgrading. Every day when I had free time, I came to see him and we chatted about many things - especially we talked about boys. Many kathoey like going to Building #7 because there are many kathoey. On his birthday, I met many boys from the dorm. Most of them were older than I am. I did not have any feeling (sexual) that night, apart from wanting to have fun and to congratulate him on his birthday. Time passed, I got drunk a bit, but I-Kham got very drunk. It was late at night and I was thinking that I needed to go to bed so that I can get up and go to school tomorrow. I told I-Kham, “I have to go, I’ll come by again tomorrow” Two boys who sat opposite me said, “Don’t go yet, stay for a while. We’ll walk you back. What number is your dorm?” I looked at them and replied, “Thank you. It is not far, just near here. I can go back on my own.” Then one boy said, “I want to walk you home and it is my pleasure. You don’t mind, do you?” His words made me feel uncomfortable. I was thinking if they are young and good looking, I would have flirted with them and would have told them to walk me home. They would not need to ask. Well, actually they are not that ugly, but what I did not like was they had big muscles, dark and heavy.

Then I felt I needed to go to a restroom, so I told them, “Well, I’ll go to the restroom and then go home”. When I was in the restroom, I could hear that there were people approaching, but I did not know who it was because it was so dark and was so quiet. When I was walking out of the restroom, there were hands hugging my waist and the person said, “Don’t scream. This is me, sitting next to you a while ago”. Because I did not want to have sex with him and I was so frightened that he did, I began to cry out. Then he covered my mouth with one hand, held me and took me to a darker corner of the restroom. I was trying to get free from his arms, but I couldn’t. When I was tired and calmed down, he told me, “Please give me oral sex, please give me oral sex. I liked you since we first met, but I was not brave enough to tell you”. After hearing that, I touched his penis. It was erected, big and filled up my hand. I did not know how to start and my heart was beating so loud. He told me, “Give me oral sex; otherwise, shall I give you anal sex?” Then I gave him oral sex with much pleasure. After that, we had anal sex without a condom. After we were done for five minutes, his friend came and asked what we were doing. I was shy and did not say anything. “Let it be my turn now. I want to have sex, too. I have not had sex for so long,” the man said while walking up to me. He took out his penis, put it into my
mouth and said, “Oral sex, please.” The man who finished having sex walked out of the restroom and waited at the front. After giving him oral sex for a while, I told him to give me anal sex. Fortunately, his penis was not as big as the first one, so it was easy to have anal sex. We had sex until he ejaculated. I then went back to sleep and the two boys went back to the dorm.

The next morning, after taking a shower and having breakfast, I went to see I-Kham. As I arrived at his room, he said, “How excellent you are last night - got two people. You were saying that you do not want to and want to go to sleep, but finally got two. How was it. Is the penis big?” I was so shy and did not know what to say. I only smiled and was thinking that well I am happy. Although they are not who I like, I still can enjoy sex with them.

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**K-C Bar**

**S (20 years old)**

K-C Bar is the only gay bar in Luang Prabang. One evening, around 10 p.m., I went there. I saw six old foreigners, aged around 55 years, sitting with three young kathoey. Later I found out that the old gay men were German. They were tall and big, and their English was not so good. The young kathoey dressed as men, but put on eye liners and other make-up. At the counter, there were two foreigners - one is named S, from Holland, but works in Paris. His is around 30 years old. Another visitor is Spanish, also around 30 years old, and he has been working in Laos for three months now. I was chatting with them until the bar closed. Outside the bar when we left were another two foreigners. I found out later that they were X and G. X runs a tailor shop - he has a Lao partner. G runs a restaurant, and has a Lao partner, too. Both of them come to the bar regularly.

On the other side of the road there were six kathoey waiting for foreigners to take them out. Some kathoey come back and forth between another bar near here. After a while, the old foreigners walked out of the bar with three kathoey. I did not know where they were going. Then the Spanish guy came to talk to several kathoey who were standing outside the bar. I learned later that he called the police to take me because he thought I was underage (he said I looked about 12-13 years old and I should not come to the bar).

At 11:45 p.m., everyone needed to leave the bar because this is the time that all entertainment places need to be closed. Everyone left the bar, but five kathoey were still standing outside the bar. I thought that they were still waiting for foreigners to take them.

Two days later, I went to the bar again. It was Sunday. After taking a shower and getting dressed in my style, I like to wear perfume to attract people. I left the guesthouse to the bar around 10:30 p.m. As I arrived at the bar, I saw the two foreigners sitting outside who come to the bar regularly. It was X and G. I saw only one Lao person who comes to the bar regularly. He was inside. He wore green Jet with sparkling earrings. He could not be someone else but K. I sat with him and ordered a soft drink, as I did not want to drink beer. We talked about many things and, of course, sex. He told me that before I came, he got a customer from this bar already. He did not tell me where they had sex. He only told me that it took five minutes. Then he came back to the bar again.
Next, there were old foreigners, the same group that I saw the day before. They walked into the bar. They sat on a long table, next to the one where K and I were sitting. After ordering drinks, one of them came to sit with us. He introduced himself, saying he is from Germany. Two minutes later, I left the table letting K and the man talk. I moved to sit with the men outside the bar. G is French, and I can speak French. We were talking about many things, like the business that they are doing, love, teenagers in Laos, and teenagers in Europe, and again what we could not miss was talking about sex. Then I saw a foreigner come to the bar with a Lao man. He was around 20-25 years old. He is K’s friend, named Q. The foreigner is a bit old, around 50-55 years old. They sat on the right-hand side, outside the gate. I did not know who he was, where he is from, and where he stays. They were in the bar not so long, paid for the drink and left.

K called me: “Come on! Come on! Come to sit with us, and to talk to us.” I replied in a local accent, “Too old, I do not want to.” Every time I turned and looked at the long table, a foreigner with black jet and jeans often looked at me. He was giving me a signal that he was interested in me, and wanted to talk to me, and wanted to take me home. I was not interested, but smiled anyway. Before the bar was closed, K came to ask me, “Don’t you want anyone?” I replied, “Too old, not for me”. K said, “Old! It does not matter. Just do it for money”. I replied, “No, thank you. But enjoy yourself!” K asked, “Do you have lubricant? At first, I did not understand what he meant because he used a local term. Then he explained it is lubricant. I said yes, I brought it with me. But K was too shy to get it from me as X and G were there. He told me to take it to him, so I walked to him and put a condom with lubricant into his pocket and walked back to my seat.

Then I saw many kathoey dressed up very fancy like they were about to go a parade or to a party. They looked very funny, and at the same time, very scary. Some wore very, very short pants. I could see their underwear. Some people wore pants with big holes. X and G were laughing at them as they walked into the bar. It seemed that they knew them. The kathoey kidded the old foreigners, but the men did not seem to be interested in them. Three minutes later, they left to go to a disco. Soon everyone left. K left with an old foreigner; another kathoey was still talking to a foreigner there. When I was about to leave the bar, the man who kept looking at me called and asked, “Where do you go?”

I didn’t reply. Just smiled and went home.

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**Camping at a Popular Tourist Site**

K and friends (mid-20s)

One day several years ago, my friends and I went camping on the Song River bank. There were 10 of us. We stayed at a bungalow for three days. On the first day, after bathing and dinner, four friends and I had a walk. What we had in mind was to look for company. All of my friends put on make up. They look just like females, and all expected that they would have boys that night.

We walked along the main road close to a boarding school (secondary school) for ethnic groups. The school is for male and female students from remote areas. Every night, young boys around 14-17 years old (in grades 3 to 6 of secondary school), with curiosity about the world around them and the society, sit out in front of the dorm. It is normal that kathoey is one of the things boys are curious about.
On that night, I saw a group of six students standing in a kind of circle in front of the dorm. They were talking and laughing. When they saw us walking past, they shouted, “Hi ladies! Where are you going? My friends are interested in you!” Then my friends laughed and replied, “Hi boys. Do you want to come with us? Come on, we will give you a treat. Do you want to go to a night club? If you want to, follow us.”

The boys laughed and consulted each other. Some wanted to come, but some did not. Some said nothing, and only waited for friends to make a decision. There were three boys who came with us. My friends immediately hugged them as if they were close friends, and flirted with them. My friends asked them questions: ages, where they study, where do they stay, etc. Then another three boys, friends of the ones that came earlier, followed us. They must have been shy and without experience. The three boys looked like they might be kathoeys; they were only laughing and, at the same time, a bit nervous. It looked like they wanted to try because the three other friends were kissed and hugged by my friends, but they only smiled and said nothing.

When we arrived at a beer shop, we arranged seats for the kathoeys and boys to sit next to each other. There were only thee couples that hugged and kissed as they were very happy. A friend of mine and I only looked and felt jealous, but I told them, “I hope you get them tonight.” We stayed until midnight. The beer shop was about to close, so we paid and went to Island Bar, which stayed open until the morning.

There are plenty of foreigners and teenagers (male and female) from Vangvieng who want to have casual relationships (sex). When we arrived at the bungalow, sat on under a shelter on the Khan River side, and ordered snacks and beers. It was about 1-2 a.m. The boys got very drunk. They mouth-kissed, played and touched penises without any shyness. For me, I wanted to hug and kiss the boy that followed us who had not been hugged and kissed by anyone yet, as he was scared and had not done this before. I wanted to have sex and tried many times, but with no success. He always refused, until I was angry.

Suddenly, there was a man with a red jacket, black trousers, and black hat. He had long hair, a clear face, and middle height with a Japanese look. He smiled and walked up to us because he knew someone in our group. His age was around 18-19 years old. I found him attractive, but I thought that it would not be possible; he would not sleep with kathoeys. I gave him a glass of beer and about 10 minutes later he said that he needed to go to a restroom. I was a bit drunk, and wanted to go to a restroom, too. So I said, “Let me take you there.” I was kidding. After using the restroom, I walked into him and touched his penis until it was erect. I was very excited, but was cool. I could not believe that he let me touch his penis. I was about to give him oral sex, but he stopped me. “If you want to do this, you need to give me 100,000 kip.” I said, “30,000 kip for oral sex, and anal sex is 50,000 kip”. I was thinking, let’s see how he replies. Then he said, “Oral sex is 50,000 kip, ok? If yes, come on, do it now before other people come”. Then I said, “Oral sex 40,000 kip, ok?” “Ok,” he replied. I gave him oral sex right there, where no one can see and know what we are doing. Suddenly, there was a person passing by, so I had to stop. Then started again, but then there was a person passing by again, so I needed to stop again. I asked him to move to somewhere darker, behind a bungalow and where no one was passing by. When we got there, I took off his trousers. He has a good build and fair skin. I stroked and kissed his body. I gave him oral sex for about 30 minutes until he ejaculated, but I did not let him release
the sperm into my body (my mouth). I had pleasure - although I was not touched or kissed at all - but I reached orgasm, too - even before him. It was great - he is handsome and it was worth paying 40,000 kip.

Then I came back to my friends, who were waiting at the shelter. Two couples had disappeared, nobody knew where they were. About 15 minutes later, they came back. After asking, one couple had sex in the bush, where no one could see. One couple had sex behind the restroom. After finishing all the beers, we went back home. When we arrived at the boarding school, the couple that had not done anything yet negotiated prices. After agreeing on the price, they left together. For those couples who could not agree on the price, they went to sleep. There was a couple that had sex behind the dorm, and later my kathoey friend told me that he was an insertive partner and also gave anal sex to the boy. It sounded unbelievable, but I have to believe it and, well, it could be possible. The next morning, we joined the camping activities as usual, but during free time, we talked about our experiences that night.

B Village - Oudomxay

K (27 years old)

Oudomxay is a province located in the northern part of Laos. There are many people living in this province. It is this province that has many young people sleeping with kathoey because they want to get money and want to try new things, as we all know. There are not many kathoeys compared to Vientiane. There are many students coming to schools in the main town. When I was young, there were two schools there: a provincial school and a district school.

Let me tell you about B village. I visited there when I was in my late teens. It is located 10 km away from the town. It takes about 20 minutes by motorbike. The road was not in good condition, so it was not convenient to travel to the village. However, the road condition was no constraint for kathoey or gays. If there are boys who like having sex and are interested in kathoey, kathoey would tell their friends, “Boys in X village are very confident and know how to have sex with kathoey. You only have some drinks with them or give them some money -10,000-20,000 kip - then you would get them”. There are 300-400 households. Most of the houses are two storied, with the walls made from bamboo and the roofs from grass. Most of the people are farmers. The boys in this village are very knowledgeable and like sleeping with kathoey. Every day, there are kathoey on motorbike from the district town coming to see the boys, and sometimes they stay overnight at the village.

One time, I asked friends to go to this village. I wanted to see if it is really like we heard about. We arrived there around 4-5 pm and went to the football ground, which is not far from the village. It is the place where boys come after school. I saw many boys playing on the ground. My friend V called a boy who he knows. The boy walked to us, and V said, “Let’s have a drink tonight. I have friends coming, are you free?” “Ok,” the boy replied. “After dinner and having a hower, my friends and I will meet you at I-K’s shop,” V said.

Then there was a boy running up to us. I really wanted to get to know him, but I was not confident to ask his name. I only looked at him. Since my friend saw me looking, he asked, “Are you interested in him? I’ll tell him to come tonight.” I said, “OK, good.” Then my friend told the
boy to come to I-K’s house for drinks. In the evening, after taking showers and dinner, we got
dressed and went to I-K’s shop, as agreed.

I-K’s shop is a typical shop selling things like a small corner store. There are also alcohol and
beer for people who drop by for a drink. The shop is in centre of the village so many people
come and it is well known by the people.

At 7 p.m., V and I came to I-K’s shop. After sitting there for 10 minutes, we told I-K that there
will be boys coming for drinks. I-K then arranged the seats and drinks. There was a double bed
at a corner of the room. It was I-K’s bed, as he is the one who keeps the shop downstairs, and
upstairs is for his mother and sisters. I-K is gay, too. He is 33 years old, but he has not come out
yet, and is not married.

Later 6-7 boys came. There were only two kathoey, excluding I-K. We had alcohol and beers, and
talked and joked until it became late and we all were a bit drunk. My friend told me, “Choose the
boy you like and take him out. It is getting late. Me and I-K are going to wait here; I’ll probably
stay over night with K”. A boy named L asked me if I wanted to go with him. “Let’s go and do it
at my place,” he asked me, “Do you want two people or only one? Between me and T, who do
you want?”

T is the boy at the football ground that I found attractive. I decided to go with both L and T. We
had sex at L’s place, downstairs. As soon as we got there, L and T took off their clothes and held
their penises pointing at my mouth. I was so excited and did not know what to do, so I gave
oral sex to T a bit and then L a bit, just taking turns back and forth between them. I was doing
that until I was tired. I told T to put on a condom and have anal sex with me. Then he took turns
with L.

I had so much pleasure that night. L had sex forcefully and loudly. His mum asked from
upstairs, “What is that sound? What are you doing? Who is sleeping with you?” He answered,
“T stayed overnight with me, nothing.” Then we continued having sex. L ejaculated inside me,
and T reached orgasm from my masturbation. I myself reached orgasm from giving myself
masturbation. T and L got two orgasms each.

I got up around 5 a.m. and told T to drop me at V’s house. I gave 20,000 kip to each of them,
and they were happy with the money. After that, V and I drove back to town. This was my first
experience in B village. Later I went to the village often, even when V was busy and I needed to
go there on my own. I am addicted to the boys there - they know how to impress kathoey.

Student Houses in Vientiane

B (20 years old)

The first time that sex happened to me was at a student house. It was Friday, a friend of my
friend was going to take an internship in another province. So we had a party. The house is
rented by the room, many people share a room. When we got drunk, we just slept side by side, 
next to each other in a row. I was sleeping between T and A, with T on my right and A on my left.
As they know that I am a student, A was teasing me, but I was not interested in him. Instead, I
was interested in T because he is good-looking, lovely, and has muscles. A is thin and small - not
attractive. Because I was so drunk, I did nothing. When A gave me a hug, I returned the hug and stroked his body until his penis erected. I touched and gave him masturbation for a while, but he did not ejaculate. A told me to give him oral sex, but I did not because I have never done that and I did not feel like giving him oral sex. At the time, there was a friend - also a student. He came to sleep between us, so I let him and A continue having sex. I then turned to T and talked to him about many things. I touched his big muscles, and I was so excited because I have not done this before. His muscles are both firm and big. Since T did not say anything to me, I moved my hand down to his breast. His breast is firm and a lot of muscles too. He kept saying nothing, so I moved my hand down to his organ. My hand was in his pants and touched his penis. The penis got big and long, as well as open. I touched his penis and turned a bit. T was feeling good - in the mood. T pushed my head downward to his penis. His penis is big and I could not cover it all. He was really in the mood and moaned a bit. I could feel that he was having a lot of pleasure. While I was giving him oral sex friends arrived, disturbing us, so we had to stopped and went back home. It was the first time that I had the chance to touch a male sexual organ.

Internet Shop, Vientiane

S (20 years old)

One day, I met with a German man, named Mario, 29 years old. He is an interior designer. We got to know each other through the Internet. I had been in contact with him before he came to Laos, and we met when he arrived to get a visa to Thailand. If getting a Thai visa in Laos, one could stay in Thailand for three months. About 2-3 weeks before coming to Laos, he asked for my number. When he arrived, he called me from the hotel. It was Saturday afternoon. He asked me out for dinner and told me where he was staying at Lanexang Hotel. We had dinner at Khob Chai Deur, not far from the hotel, only three minutes on foot. We were talking about many things, from family to work. After that, we went back to the hotel. Perhaps I do not need to say, but for sure it was to have sex, because on the way back he held my hand all the time. He asked if I wanted to watch TV in his room, and I knew right away what was going to happen. In short, we did not watch TV. As soon as we entered the room, we started kissing and moving on to penetration. The man was the receptive partner and I was the insertive partner. We had sex twice that night. The next morning, I went back home and then went to school.

The next day was not different from the day before. We had dinner and went back to the hotel for sex. A day later he left for Thailand. These days, I still get his letter occasionally, like New Years or Christmas. For those making contact with foreigners through the Internet, they often know about the websites from friends and from their foreign partners. These websites are gay websites or related to gays. It is rather easy to communicate though these websites. People only create their own profile at the websites, load pictures into their home pages, then enter personal details.

When foreigners want to come to Laos and get a visa for another country, they would search and look for Lao people in gay websites. They would write to 4-5 kathoey/gays a few weeks in advance and make appointments where to meet, contact numbers, etc. They organize a schedule of who to meet on what day, and when. When they arrive in Laos, they call the kathoey or gays. After both parties agree what to exchange, it then moves to sex. Mostly they have sex at the guesthouse or at the hotel where the foreigners are staying.
ANNEX III

Nutshell ‘Life’ Stories from Some Key Informants

U

I am 18 years old, a student in my last year at secondary school in Vientiane. My grandmother was a folk singer (Morlam). She loves dancing and so do I. I wanted to follow grandma, I love dancing like a woman. When I was 7 years old, I joined a local cultural centre. While playing with friends, I was glad when they touched my body with their groins.

My first sexual experience was at 10 years old with my neighbor. The man worked in a guesthouse. He often came to my house and brought me gifts. One day, he took me to where he worked. The man put his penis into my mouth behind a counter, but he did not ejaculate. I was scared and shy. Later, I had sex with this man about 2-3 times, with no force. It was masturbation and oral sex. The man bought me clothes and gave me some money. Then he went to Thailand, and we lost contact.

I lost my virginity, my first anal sex, when I was 13 years old with my friend. We both were students, and we enjoyed having sex. He was good-looking. We were in the relationship for two years, and had sex 3-4 times a week. We broke up because the boy had a girlfriend, and then he became mengda - a man who relies on a woman for his living.

When I was in the 3rd year of secondary school, I had anal sex with a boy who lived in a nearby village. The boy was in the 2nd year. Only I fell in love. He was not interested in me, and we did not have sex again because the boy did not give me the chance. During that time, I did not have sex with other people. It lasted only three months.

Then I was in a relationship with another person for four years. We both were students in the 4th year. I loved him a lot, so I was not brave enough to have sex with him - only touches, kisses, and then ejaculation. We bought things for each other. During the relationship, I also had other sleeping partners. We broke up because he had a girlfriend. I got bored and told him to break up, but he still wanted to be with me.

Since then, I have slept with many people and did not want to be hurt again. I think no true love could happen and I just pay for sex. Once I slept with a monk at a temple. My friends had done this before, so this time they asked me to come along to the temple with them (four kathoey friends). On the day, they brought some beer. After drinking, we had sex. Only two kathoey and two monks had sex. I had sex with a monk and another friend had sex with another novice. Both couples had anal sex without a condom.

I am now a dancer for a local dance troupe with a well-known singer. As a dancer, I travel to many places, but I did not have much chance to have sleeping partners because there was no time- after concerts it was late and I was tired. Once I had sex with another dancer in the same group on the trip to Savannakhet. He is gay; and it was for finding release for the two of us. I did not give him any money. I did not have sex with him again. He is just a colleague, and we only say “hi” when we meet.
Recently, I got a new boyfriend (faen) - a 13-year-old boy who lives in the same suburb as me. We have anal sex. We want to have sex whenever we get together. I like both old persons and young boys as long as they are handsome. But it is easier to get boys; they like trying something new.

Apart from my faen, I have many sleeping partners who I have sex with regularly. Some of them are workers, security guards, and young students. Usually I look for sex partners in night clubs. I approach boys by getting close to them while dancing. I approach security guards when they are on duty during the nights. I prefer Lao people because it feels good (hed kak) and it takes them a short time to ejaculate (nam taek wai). I have slept with eight foreigners, and it was for money.

There are girls who like me, but I do not find females interesting because I still want to sleep with guys. So now I do not want to have a girlfriend. My friends told me about having sex with women. I also watched sex movies male and female, so I wanted to try having sex with a female. I slept with one girl. She was also a student. It was mutual sexual desire; the girl wanted it, too. I do not want to sleep with sex workers because I am afraid of getting infected. I think when I have sex with a female, I feel emotional pleasure (mee kwamsuk teua jay); and when having sex with males, it is to find physical release (pordpoi).

I want to have sex twice a week, about two new faces per month. I have sex sometimes at a well-known guesthouse, in a backyard garden where there is lots of banana trees, at the stadium, at my house or the boy’s houses. I do not often use condoms. I will see if the penis of the men is open or not. If it is open, I use a condom, if it is still closed, I don't. Also when I get drunk, I do not use a condom. But I use a condom with men who I think have had sex with women.

In my classroom, there are 45 students: 22 are males and about seven are gay/kathoey. I have not experienced any serious discrimination from others. Sometimes, my friends (both boys and girls) do pick on me for being kathoey. People in my village accept me being kathoey. If people do not accept me, never mind, I can take care of myself and do not need help from others for my living. I am confident to express myself and proud of myself for who I am and what I can do. Well, others can not do the same.

In the future, I want to have a wife and have children because my penis still gets erect. I think relationships between gays will not last. But relationship between male and female is long-lasting. Being old, gays need to spend a lot of money for sex.

R

I am 27 years old, from Sayaboury. I am now a final year student at university (I study Lao language). When I was a child, I was a shy person. Sometimes I liked boys, but was too shy to talk to them. My first sexual experience was when I was at 18 years old. It was with a 17-year-old boy. At the time, I was a student at a teacher training college in another province. We had sex in the dormitory. We only covered ourselves with a blanket. He is also from Sayaboury. We were staying in different buildings. I tried to get close to him; and he knew that I liked him. I went to see him at his building very often, whenever I have free time. We often had conversations as people who are from the same province. On that day, as usual, I went to see him. We talked until late at night. He covered me with a blanket. I thought he was kidding because there were
many people. Under the blanket, he took off his clothes and penetrated my anus. Some friends were cheering. Some people would think we were kidding each other. After that day, we did not have sex again.

The second time was also with a student from my home province. We had sex when many people went to a funeral ceremony, and I and another boy were assigned to keep the dorm. There was no one else, only two of us. I was sitting near a window and he was sitting by a wall. He told me about ghosts. I told him to stop talking about ghosts, or otherwise I will have to come close and sit next to him. He kept telling the story. I was afraid and moved close to him. Then he hugged me and pulled my hand to his penis. We had anal sex without a condom. After that night, we did not have a chance to have sex with each other again. While I was at the teacher training college, I had sex with other students, but not many. During that time, sex between men and kathoey was only amongst people who know each others - amongst friends. If the boys were not our friends, we were not brave to tease them. We did not go out and look for boys like we do today.

When I was in Sayaboury, I liked going out to rural areas, and looked for sleeping partners. I am confident that I could seduce people with words. When I went out with many friends, they would tell me not to approach certain ones who they like, because they were afraid that I would get them if I got the chance to talk to them.

After graduating from the teacher training college, I was a secondary school teacher in Sayaboury for a year before coming to Vientiane. It was the year 2000. I did not have sex with my students because I was concerned about my reputation. But I did have sex with students from other schools. Well, I was not their teacher. I often got boys at festivals. When I saw them, I asked them to join my table, bought them drinks, and asked them to come along to my friend’s house. Then we had sex at my place. I did not give them any money. I only had sex with boys - not married men. I don’t like older men. Normally, when kathoey have sex with men, they need to pay for food and drinks for the men and give the boy money. In Sayaboury, most of the time this is not the case. People do not often mention about getting money. It is mainly a mutual feeling of the partners.

Teachers, students and staff at the education department also know that I am kathoey. I can not dress too bright, can not keep long hair, and can not enlarge my breasts because I am an inspector at the school. My partners are between 15-20 years old. I find younger boys much more attractive. They also want sex very much. They have so much desire. For older men, even if they are handsome, I still do not like them. It is maybe because I am a small person, too. Here, in Vientiane, I have had sex with many students - some from the same dorm, some are from other dorms. When I get drunk, I go around to different dorms and look for men. Men from the same building often drop by at my room for sex before taking a shower in the morning as my room is just next to the bathrooms. Also my roommates often sleep outside. At the dorm, they watch sex movies, follow it, and try out with kathoey. Porn movies are really popular. Now it is forbidden for students to have TV in the dorms because of so many sex movies.

Now I have a boyfriend. He is 17 years old. He is at fifth year secondary school, and lives with his brother in a village near the university. We met at the Morning Market bus station when I was catching a bus to university. We were on the same bus. I found him very handsome. On the
way, as people got off I moved to sit next to him. I asked whether he had come alone or with somebody. We talked a bit. I asked for his number. Since then, we call each other and meet. We have been in the relationship for two months, but I have not had sex with him yet. I am shy to have sex with the one I love.

When having sex, I do not want anybody to touch my penis. I don’t ever have an orgasm when I am with a partner; I am shy. Sometimes I will watch a porn movie and masturbate, but never if someone else is around. I do not get money from sex, but I do give some money to my partners - the ones who I feel special about.

I did not use condoms before, but since I have been a volunteer with a health programme, I do. Well, there are still times I do not use one - when I do not bring any with me.

If I can choose, I would like to to be born as kathoey again. Being kathoey, one can do whatever she wants. Being a woman, it is difficult to go out and stay outside late, and you need to be within a boundary. If going out late at night, girls will be criticized. In the future my mother wants me to live in a big city, a more civilized place so that it is easy to find job.

I am 24 years old and from the south of Laos. When I was young, I lived in a temple from about the age of eight. We call this sankalii – a person who helps the monks and local people who come to make merit at the temple. There were nine monks living at this temple.

When I was about 13, a Thai monk came to visit for about one week. He came with a Lao friend. The Thai monk knew people at the temple, so he came to visit specifically. At the time, I was the youngest there, and already I had a female nature. The Thai monk asked if I would sleep with him for company. That first night he asked me to touch him and suck him. The second night he entered me from behind. We didn’t use condoms. It was the first time I had sexual pleasure – I had an orgasm. I did not know about sex before this. We stayed together for a week and when he left I missed him very much. I wanted to go with him, but he wouldn’t let me. He used to write to me and send me presents. One other time, I had sex with a young man who was in the temple for a short period (neyn - acolyte). My next lover was a friend I had known since childhood. We used to sleep together as friends, but when we were about 14 years old we started to hold each other at night and give each other pleasure. But I knew he had already had girlfriends, so I didn’t want to get too close to him or fall in love with him. After him, I slept with another friend at school for several years. He was a ‘real’ man – he had a girlfriend too. Now he is married. The last time we had sex was just before he got married. We are still friends and still see each other sometimes, but we don’t have sex anymore. My mother moved to Vientiane and opened a pharmacy here, just out of town. So I moved here also and kept on at secondary school until year 6. I helped my mother run the store, and would have sex with students sometimes. I gave them money each time to help their study – 20,000-30,000 kip. Sometimes up to 50,000 kip. I didn’t sleep with many. They would come and find me – I had about 10 partners like this. I slept with a gay once. I knew he wanted me to do it to him – I tried, but I felt disgusted. It was like sleeping with someone of the same sex. I had sex with two foreigners also – they gave me 200,000 kip. I met the first at a disco. The second man was a teacher at the university who I met when I was working at a sauna. He invited me to his house
and showed me a porn movie (males and females), and asked me to do the same things to him. I only went once with him, but he still contacts me. He has two children. These days, my main partners are either younger or the same age.

One time when I was a volunteer at PSI I met a kathoey with long hair and liked being with ‘her’. It made me think I could be with a woman. So I decided to try having a girlfriend. I ended up getting a girlfriend through my work – I had started working at a hotel organizing women for guests who wanted sex. She was the daughter of my mother’s friend. I have known her for more than a year, and a while after I met her I decided to get married to her. I haven’t slept with another man for over 12 months. Since getting married, I made the decision to not be with other men – so I intend to stick to this. But when we have a fight over something, I still remember what it was like with men and miss it. But I have changed now. I don’t usually think of sex with men. For instance, when I masturbate I think of sex with a woman. My wife is pregnant now.

I feel freer now. I wanted a different direction in life. When I was with other men, I always had to be careful. I had to tell my friends not to behave like kathoey when they came to visit. I never told my parents I liked to have sex with men, although I think they must have suspected something. Perhaps they just thought I was fooling around, but I kept things very secret from them. My sister would always tell me it was no good being a kathoey and that I should get married.

Now my wife is very jealous, so I don’t know if I will ever sleep with another man again. I try to keep her happy by calling her all the time and telling her not to worry about me. I never used to use condoms with my partners. Sometimes I tried, but they never wanted to use one.

I am happy I got married: I think love is different between men and women. If I am with another man, I have to take care of everything...but with my wife, we share everything. It is good for my parents and I want a child, too. As well, I don’t have to worry about diseases now.

X

I am 52 and live several hours outside of Vientiane. I was born here and stayed at school here in the countryside until I was 16, when I moved to the capital Vientiane and got a job as a typist in a government office. I had never met a kathoey before. I had heard the word phumae (a term for male/female used for other species, but not humans) before, but never had anyone to talk to about such things. I knew by the time I was a teenager that I liked good-looking men. I used to talk with girls about which males were handsome. In the office where I worked, I met an older kathoey who started to take me around town. Another kathoey friend of his would grab me and I started to enjoy it.

In the late 1960s, the Fountain had hundreds of beautiful kathoey who would hang around looking for partners. Westerners would prefer short-haired kathoey, but the Chinese and Vietnamese would go for the ones with long hair. The Lido (bar) was famous for Westerners who liked opium (and boys). Then couples would go to the Apollo Hotel. I began to have sex with older foreigners and with younger Lao men. It was just for fun – no money was involved in those days. We used to go to the trees in front of LaneXang Hotel. I would get money from the foreigners, though.
After the revolution, lots of people were arrested. The Fountain became totally quiet. Everyone had to suppress their behaviour - to have short hair and behave like men. I still slept with foreigners for money sometimes...Russians and Vietnamese, but it felt uncomfortable. I would always rush home to wash myself – I felt like a prostitute. One day I went over to a friend's house. After a while, I left with a boyfriend, but I heard later that the police had arrived and arrested everyone. There were five kathoeys who got sent to a rehabilitation camp on Don Tao (they told me later it was fun – because they had so much attention from other guys). I don't know. Later, when they were released, they all went overseas.

I was scared to display any outward characteristics. It wasn't like there were no kathoeys anymore, but just that we had to keep it secret inside our houses or beauty shops. I had no work and no income. Lots of people disappeared to Thailand, so after one year I decided to do the same. I prepared an inner-tube and with a friend arranged to meet by the river. The road was closed after 10 p.m., so we sneaked to the river. I met with friends (two women and three men). The pigs in the nearby pig farm were all squealing at our presence and I was terrified we would be caught. The farmer called out, “Have a good trip!” Leaving across the river in the tire, I got caught on a fish hook in my leg – I still have the scar. I had to chew through the line.

We made it to Sri Chiang Mai across the river. I climbed the ladder at the bank and called for help. Villagers got 500 baht for turning in people who have come across. I spent a week in prison. Police would take women away and have sex with them. In the prison, prisoners would try with women, and if they resisted, would turn to the kathoeys and rape them. I ended up in a refugee centre with 20,000 others. There must have been 200-300 kathoeys there. We would often have sex. Everyone was poor. Most guys were too lazy to study for vocational jobs. Girls and kathoeys were more diligent, learning about handicrafts or other skill. I studied to be a beautician. I registered as a student so I could emigrate to a Western country, but I didn’t get to go. Only soldiers did. Instead, I ended up going to Hainan in China. One thousand in all went there from our camp. There were many more males than women, so I had partners constantly for sex. Chinese men would also come to see me. I liked them much better than Lao men, who are like logs. They make me do all the work, whereas the Chinese are really affectionate.

I was happy there. I stayed for 10 years and didn’t want to come back. I had a Vietnamese boyfriend – he was a complete male. We were all returned about 16 years ago in 1990. I took over my parent's land when I got back. It is country life: I work the fields, make baskets and do beauty work in the evenings at a small shop. Also for special occasions like weddings. When I first came back, I didn't want to go anywhere. It wasn't until about 1994 that I started to have sex again – with men who were married. After a few more years, I started having sex with younger men. I have to pay, but I like them because they are handsome and I can teach them and tell them what to do. I will give them 100,000 kip to ‘do’ me, or 50,000 if I do oral for them. A few years ago, there was a lot of drugs around and I could easily get guys by giving them drugs (ATS) - five pills for everything; three if he is receptive partner. But that has changed now – the police are more active in stopping the drugs – and those who are addicted to drugs are not at all attractive, but skinny and dark.

I always go out with two friends as I am scared of being attacked or robbed. Quite often we share – one guy for two kathoeys or vice versa. I used to use a Chinese version of Viagra®, but it is not much use if I don’t end up getting a partner. I don’t like to dress like a woman; I get really
embarrassed by the thought of an old kathoey trying to look beautiful. I like to be alone – I am sorry I don't have children, but I am content. I try to be discrete about my life not to embarrass my family. I never stay long with a guy. I will see him a few times, but then I get bored. Usually I will only see him once. We have sex in the bathroom or the fields. I did take care of one young man and supported him through high school. In the end, the young man told me all the sweet things he had said over the years were just lies to get money; that he didn't love me and I should never trust a young man again.

Now I figure it is better to be alone. Of course, young men will lie to older kathoeys to get what they want. Nowadays, more money is involved. In the past, young men just wanted to experiment. It is easy to get sleeping partners these days because there is a new technical school in the area and more than 2,000 students from all over the country in the dormitories. On weekends it is easy to find someone for sex over there, but usually I meet them in the beer halls. Now I am old, and sex once a week is enough. People these days want sex at a very young age. At 14, most young men want to begin having sex. We kathoeys are often the first partner. But we could never be a long-term partner. It is against the custom (phit hetkhong). Sure, I could fall in love, but it couldn't happen. I get bored too quickly.

I like life in the country. It is quiet and I can trust people. In Vientiane, an old kathoey is always at risk of being robbed.

Q

I am 25. I left school early and went across the river to Sri Chiang Mai to get money. From there I went with a relative to Pattani in the south of Thailand selling small items in a market near the hospital. I was scared they would sell me to people in Malaysia, so I came back home. Another relative with a Western boyfriend had a bar in Pattaya, so I went there to work. I was 15 years old at the time. It was a boy bar – for gay men and for women, as well. Usually I was chosen last – I only got about 500 baht a time. A Western woman was my first lover. Then a Canadian sailor took me to his room. He put some powder in a glass and drank it before sex. I didn't want to have anal sex – only oral, but the man didn't agree. We argued and I said I would call the police. He didn't say anything. Then he hit me, threw me onto the bed and raped me. I fainted, and when I came around the man was still having sex with me. I cried.

I stayed in the bar for two years. Then I came back to Vientiane. When I first returned, I used to have a lot of sex - about 50 men a month, but this has changed these days. Nowadays, only about 2-3 a month. It was beginning to cost too much to pay to the men, and I am worried about diseases.

When I have sex, I like ‘sadism’ - I like men with big penises who do it really hard so it hurts. But I usually like to be the insertor, and I will do it really hard. If the guy is big, I will receive; if he is small, I will do it to him. I like to do it back so one side isn’t always on the receiving end and is taken advantage of (sia piap). I sleep with men, gay men, kathoeys and women (but not so much with women, as sex is boring – they don’t do oral sex, which I like). I also like to tag-team with another friend, T. Sometimes T and I will have up to 10 young men here at a time.
I will get married in the future. God made the world with males and females. It feels unnatural to be like this (phit thamasaat). My heart made me like this – but I will change. I don’t want to disappoint my wife. No men are faithful with other men. Women’s love is different. It is stronger. They can put up with men having many partners and still stay faithful. Two men together can’t do this. I could never have a permanent male partner - it would cost me too much. Men lose advantage (sia ponprayot) with women, i.e. it costs them money, but they can take advantage (day ponprayot) of kathoeys.

In the meantime, I like playing around. I will learn and get a trade (he works in a beauty shop).

B

I am 19 years old, from Vientiane, and study at an English language college. I am also now working for an international organisation.

I have been kathoey since I was young. I got on well with my sister and mother. I even went to a beauty salon with my Mum and got my nails polished. At first, they did not say anything to me for being kathoey. It was not until I was at 2nd year secondary school when I grew my hair long and kept my nails polished that my parents complained about me. I was trying to show them that being kathoey is not always being misbehaved. I did not drink. Whenever I went out, I told them. Later they did not complain any more. They knew that I know what is right and what is wrong.

I have had two boy friends. I met the first person at an Internet shop. The man was a foreigner. He was a doctor. We had conversations and met each other many times at the Internet shop and at the park. We had sex after getting to know each other for five days. I can not have sex with the person who I met for the first time. It’s like we do not have value. I need to know the person first. I could feel that we both were interested in each other, and the man suggested sex. When I like/love a person, I want to be together with him, so I wanted to try. At the beginning, I was thinking what would happen if the man kills me. Who knows? After meeting him a few times, I did not feel worried. After sleeping together, the man gave me some money, but I did not accept and was unhappy. I told him that I am not a prostitute. The man said he was sorry. After that, we slept with each other 7-8 times at a guest house before the man left to his country.

I like foreigners because in the relationship it involves more sharing, I like their character, personalities and their way of thinking -equality. I do not like Lao partners because they often deceive kathoey and they engage with kathoey only expecting benefit in return. I am usually the receptive partner, but if my partner wants me to be insertive, I could. I always use condoms.

I had a Laotian boyfriend. He is a member of the national team - taekwondo. He is a ‘real’ man. We are around the same age. I met him at a friend’s house. After that, I called and sent him messages by SMS every day. We met each other almost every day. Occasionally, like Valentine’s Day, we brought gifts for each other. I remember once I brought him a T-shirt and he bought me a ring. I was so impressed. Our relationship flourished day by day. I got to know his family, parents, brothers and sisters. Sometimes, when he practiced or had competitions, I would sit near the course and cheer. He did not pay attention to me, but I understand. In public, men would not want others to know that they are in relationship with kathoey. What I really like
about him, and some men do not have, is he is a very gentle man. He gave *kathoey* respect, and never talked badly to *kathoey*.

He often went abroad for competitions. Once he went to Korea. When he was back from competition overseas, I called him and he always asked me out for drinks. Although he is a polite man, he is still like a child - a fun-loving person, playing day after day. I felt bored, because that is not how I socialize. This was the reason why I gradually separated from him. I stopped answering his calls and did not reply to his SMS messages. It was 7-8 months that we were in the relationship, but we did not have sex. The man is still confused and can not choose between male and female. Nowadays, the man comes to see me sometimes and he is still unclear in what he wants.

My second foreign partner was American. We got to know each other through chatting on the Internet over 3-4 months. He eventually came to Laos. I took care of him. He is over thirty. We had oral sex. As he got to know about Laos and the gay community here, he slept around with many people. We were together for a week, then when I learned that he slept with many people, I did not like him any more. So we were not together for the 3 remaining weeks of his stay in Laos. That was it, no contact any more.

Now I am in a relationship for six months with an American. He is 28 and working on eco-tourism in the North. He speaks very good Lao. We met each other in Donchanh (night club). We have not had sex yet; only kissing and hugging. We still have regular contact.

I am proud of being *kathoey*. Being male is only male, girl is only girl, but being *kathoey* is more interesting. We can be/do what both sexes do. In the future, I will have a male foreign partner. I will adopt two children from poor families - a boy and a girl.

K

I am 28 years old, from a province a few hours away from Vientiane. Now I work in a boutique shop in in the city.

I felt as a girl since I was young. It was only when I was 10 years old that I started to realise that I really wanted to be a girl. People picked on me. I was so shy. I was even in a fight with a friend who was teasing me about being *kathoey* when I was in early secondary school. Then the feeling of being *kathoey* disappeared. I had female friends, and we went to work in the field together. My parents often asked my friends, “Where is our daughter. Has she not come back yet?”

I also had a girlfriend when I was about 14 years old and the girl was around the same age. After getting to know each other for a year, we had sex many times. My parents wanted me to get married and both our families assumed this would happen, but I did not want to. I felt that I was not ready, yet. Then I came to Vientiane in 2000. If I stayed at home, I would be working in the fields. I wanted to do something else to earn my living. So I decided to look for a job in Vientiane. I did not know about meeting foreigners. What was in my mind was just to look for a job. I told my parents that I will be going to Vientiane for 2-3 days, but when I left home I took all my belongings and left my bedroom empty. I did not return for several years. I have been living here for 6 years. Nowadays I sometimes go home to visit my parents, but do not have sex.
with anyone there. In the rural villages, it is very restrictive because people know each other. I don't think people even imagine that men could have sex with men.

My first sexual experience with a male was when I was 20 years old, with two British men. At the time I was working in a guesthouse. The men were around 50 years old, tall, heavy and fair. They came to see me at work very often. I knew that they were gay. One day, they asked me to go out for a drink. I was aware that it could lead to sex. I decided to go out with them because I wanted money, as my friends told me that we will get money from sleeping with foreigners. Then I got drunk. I only remembered that they gave me something to take and then I had the mood and my penis grew large. It was a kind of liquid, but I did not know what it was. The next thing I knew, I passed out. I was unconscious and could not remember what happened. When I became conscious, it was already over. I knew something had happened to me. I think I was raped. The men gave me some money. After that I came to see them at their place, and had sex with another person. Later the men left to their country. I learnt to use e-mail and the Internet, and we contacted each other regularly though e-mail before losing contact later on.

After that, I had another foreign boyfriend. Well, before this I slept with other people, too, but it was just to find release. The man works at the dam - Nam Theun 2. We met at a local sauna. We had sex on the first day we met at his house. I gave him oral sex and anal sex. After having sex, we went out for dinner. After dinner, we went back to his house and I stayed overnight there. We were in a relationship for over a year. After his project finished, he went back home. We are slowly losing contact, but I have been thinking of him since then.

My sleeping partners are both young and old. The oldest are foreigners around 42 or 50. Old foreigners give money - up to USD 400 - and also take care of us. Young foreigners often do not give money, so I sleep with older foreigners. It's hard to get money from Laotian men, but when I want to have sex, I choose younger Laotian men - even if I pay for them. I often get partners at my work - the shop, sauna, Internet shop. With Laotian partners, it is often by accident when I go out with friends. I have sex about once or twice a week. Most of the time I do not use a condom. I don't always take one with me.

I don't think men can have a long-term relationship. It is difficult to decide who would lead. Men and men are the same, but it is difficult to be in an equal relationship. Having a Laotian boyfriend, I need to do many things for them: washing, cooking. Young Laotian guys do not understand that I need to work. They only want me to please them. It is not sharing. But I do not think I will get married with a woman in the future. I think I will take care of myself. Being gay would not be a constraint for someone in getting a job. In the service sector, there are many gays - probably 2 in 10 people are gays.

M

I am 22 years old. I am now working in a beauty salon in Vientiane. I have been kathoey since I was young. I have 5 cousins who are kathoey, which makes me think that being kathoey is an inheritable disease (kammaphan).

When I was 8, I noticed that I am kathoey. At that time, I had a boyfriend who was 13 years old; he was a friend of mine and my neighbor. We watched sex movie and had oral and anal sex. Another time I was playing hide and seek with friends around a pile of straw in a paddy field.
There was only one boy, the same boy as the first time, with five *kathoey*. We took turns giving oral sex to the boy.

I started dressing like a female when I was 15. I hung out with *kathoey* friends and dropped out from school. I played cards, did and sold drugs (ATS), and stole money from my parents.

I met my second boyfriend at the beauty salon where I worked. He came to the shop with his aunt. I liked him, and his aunt told me that he was gay. His aunt knew my boss, and he got my number from the boss. Then he called and asked me out for a drink. Once day, when we went out for drinks, he got drunk. I asked a guard to ride my motorbike to a guesthouse and I was holding him in the back seat. While he was so drunk and had no self-control, we had sex. I was the insertive partner. I gave him anal sex, and he was bleeding. I was worried that he would die. When the man became conscious, he asked me, “Why did you do this to me?” I said, “Because I love you. I want to have sex with people I like.”

After that night, we slept with each other again. I was both the insertive and receptive partner. Then we got married. It was a small Baci ceremony on his birthday at his house. I moved to his house. His parents accepted me. While we were together, we argued a lot because he often got drunk and did nothing except use money. I was the only one to bring home any income. Later, he even refused to have sex with me because he was having someone else. I said to him, “I sleep with you because I love you and if you cannot have sex with me, then that’s the end.” One day, my friend told me, “Your husband is now a wife of another man.” When I followed him, I got to know the truth. I saw him with a foreigner, mouth-to-mouth kissing each other. I kept quiet. He even stole my money and spent it with another man.

One day, I asked him out to a nightclub. He said, “If I will dress like a female, will you go with me?” Well, I helped him get dressed, and we went together to Km 2 night club. At the night club, I hugged and kissed a man. It was to make him feel jealous. When he saw what I did, we had a fight. He hit me on my head with a bottle, and I hit him with my shoes. We both were caught by the police, and they took us to the local station. After that night, he did not come home for two weeks. I had been in the relationship with him for three years. Then I moved out from his house and rented my own room.

I like dressing up - seven days, seven styles. Being *kathoey*, you need to be more beautiful than women so that you can compete with them. I think I want to have a surgery, but still can not make the decision (*song jit song jai*). I am worried that after the surgery, if I wanted to use it, I would regret it. If I can choose, I want to be born as *kathoey* because *kathoey* is clever, knowing many styles of sex. *Kathoey* can sleep with anyone without worrying about getting pregnant. But it is true that *kathoey* is disadvantaged in comparison with women. Regarding sexual organ, they can not give birth, and their love is uncertain.

I have sex with foreigners. I let them touch my penis. They are not shy and so neither am I. Also, they do not gossip about us. They just stay for short while and leave. For Laotians, I don't let them touch my penis. I am afraid they would gossip about me. Sometimes I get money from men - about 50,000 kip - and sometimes I don't. I sometimes refuse to have sex. It depends on my mood. The ones I refused to have sex with are not handsome. In general, I spend more money for sex, rather than receive money. My partners are students, foreigners, married men,
and gays. Even though I have long hair, I consider myself as gay because I can be the insertive partner. My sleeping partners are 13-51 years old. I prefer young people because it is more attractive.

I have been using amphetamine for two years. I had kathoey friends, and together we sold and used it. Nowadays, I only use it, but don't sell it. I am bored. No one loves me. I have been using contraception since I began to dress female. It is for enlarging my breasts, but my penis still erects. My older kathoey friends told me that being kathoey you need to be good at having sex, know many styles, and able to get over men.

E

I am 28 years old, from outside a city in the North. Before I did not feel I was kathoey. When a friend said I was “kathoey,” I did not like and did not want him to say so. I could not accept and was so shy.

My first sex was when I was at first-year secondary school. It was with my neighbor, who was the same age as me. He knew that I am kathoey, so he wanted me to play with his penis. He kept persuading me, so I gave him masturbation and oral sex until he ejaculated. It was because I knew him; otherwise, I would not. After that time, we had sex again three or four times.

When I was in the first year of secondary school, I felt under pressure not to be kathoey. I had a girlfriend as a cover up so that people think I am a man. We were in the relationship for two years, and we had sex many times. Then I went to technical school, so we lost contact. During this time, I also had a male partner. We were friends, but then he had a girlfriend so I was broken-hearted. Then I had another girlfriend, and we had sex. It is fun, but I get more pleasure and satisfaction from men than from women.

When I was at the technical school, I had male partners, but with no penetration. I gave my virginity to a married man. He was working in his garden, which was close to mine. I was around 17 years old. We had sex under a tree. It hurt. After that, I felt like I do not want to do it anymore. Later on, I want to have sex with him again. I went to see him, but he refused. It was after three visits that the man agreed to have sex with me. Then, we only needed to wink at each other and we knew what was next; we understood each other. Other people wonder why I could collect fruits from the man’s garden.

I became kathoey when I was 20, and have been dressing like female for seven to eight years now. I have been living in this house for a year. Both female and male students come to watch TV in my house. Sometimes I make a match for them. When kathoey come to my house, I let the students know and they come. Sometimes the students just come to look for kathoey here at my house.

I have sex with students and middle-aged men...sometimes with married men. Most of them are from my district. They often do not have experience. It is easier here than in town to get men. In town, men like pretending not to be interested and ask for a lot of money. Before, I needed to go out and look for men; now the men know and they just come to me. Here there are not many kathoey, but in town there are many. Men in my district want to try having sex and they are easy to get.
Most of the time, I use condoms unless I don’t have one with me, or sometimes I only have oral sex. Most of the men I sleep with do not refuse using condoms. I sometimes want to negotiate with a person who does not want to use a condom so that I can try out wearing condoms for the man without letting them know. I only learn from the training, but have not had a chance to practice this technique. I do not use condoms with handsome men. If their penises smell, I do not give them oral sex. I tell young people to use condoms.

Without anal sex, for me it would be like not having sex. Kathoey have pleasure through ‘possessing’ (dai) men, and this means having anal sex. Giving men masturbation means not completely ‘having’ men. Men lose when having sex with kathoey. It means they ejaculate, losing their juice. Many kathoey don’t like men to touch them, but I want men to touch my penis. Some men do and some don’t. I tell the men to touch my penis. If they do, it is great. If they don’t, never mind. I have been an insertive partner twice in my life. It was because young boys asked for it. I am only the insertive partner when my partner asks me to do so; otherwise, I won’t. I prefer being a receptive partner, and I need to have a climax. Otherwise, I just want to continue looking for more sex.

I spend money for sex quite often. The most was 40,000 kip, and the least was 2000 kip. A married man gave me the most - 100,000 kip. I do not have experience with foreigners.

This is my happiness. My younger brother is also kathoey. Once while I was giving oral sex to a man in a paddy field, I looked up and I saw my younger brother looking at me. I was so shy. I could not argue with him, as he holds my secret. It is maybe because he saw me having sex and being kathoey that he became kathoey, too. My parents know that I am kathoey, but they do not say anything. In my life there is nothing else - only my penis, cards and lottery.

Z

I am 26 years old. I’m a secondary school teacher in the city teaching Lao. I used to live in Luang Prabang and was a teacher there for one year before moving here in 2003. When I first arrived, I took accounting classes for one year, then worked with a shipping company for over a year. I have been a Lao teacher for over a year now.

Back home, when I was 15, I had a girlfriend. We were in the relationship for over a year until she was forced by her parents to marry another man. Otherwise, her stepmother would not let her stay in the house. Later, when I was 22, I had a second girl I was interested in - a student at a teacher training collage. She was 26. The girl was not interested in me just because I was younger. But I kept trying to be her boyfriend. My friends also tried to match us together. Finally, I did not succeed. The third girl was when I was a teacher in Luang Prabang. We were in the relationship for one month. Then the girl found another boyfriend. I had a relationship with a fourth girlfriend for two years. During that time, I did not get a salary as a teacher for many months. My sister asked me to come to Vientiane, and I decided to look for work there. After leaving Luang Prabang for a year, my girlfriend married someone else. After having these experiences with girls, I did not want to have a girlfriend anymore. I was sick of being broken-hearted. Once I even wanted to kill myself.

When I came to Vientiane, my gay friend who was also from Luang Prabang persuaded me to try having a relationship with a man. We became lovers. We were in a relationship for over a
year. He was a student at the university. One day, we both got drunk and had sex. We had sex with each other four times. After graduation, he went back home, then got married in three months.

For me, a boyfriend (faen) is someone who one has sex with, stays together with for a long time, takes care of and pleases each other. Apart from my faen, I’ve slept with three others. They were friends, and it was just to take care of business, just to find release. The first was a university student. He was around the same age. We had sex at his place, and we took turns. I was both receptive and insertive, and so was he. The second was 24. I got to know him through my friends. We had sex after knowing each other for two days. We both got drunk and I was the insertive partner. I think he was probably gay. The third was 25. He told me he liked me. We were in the relationship for a month, and we had sex about four times. He liked another gay man. The relationship with each of them was short because it was just for finding release...no love.

I could love both male and female, but a relationship with a male would not be acceptable to my parents. Also, if I decided to have a male partner, then I would not have children, and who would take care of me when I get older. I am concerned about the future. Some people get old and do not have children. If they do not have money, then it is difficult for them. They would be a burden for their nieces or nephews. Because of this reason, I am still not 100 percent sure, and I have not yet decided to choose a male partner. If I do take a male partner, it would be only possible with a foreigner. Then I could hide the fact that we are partners. I would tell others that we are friends, as people still do not accept gay partners. If possible, I would choose a male foreign partner, rather than Thai, because I do not like their personalities. Thai people often lie. But I still do not know how to make contact with foreigners, and how to approach them. I sometimes go to nightclubs, but it is not for seeking partners. Frankly speaking, I do not know how to flirt.

If my parents want me to get married, I say that I am not ready yet. If I have a girlfriend, I need to please the girl. Girls are often short-tempered (jai noi), and they often call to find out where you are. Having relationships with males, I do not need to please them. We can feel comfortable with each other (pen kan eng), love each other and trust each other - no need to make follow-up phone calls too often. Well, I think both types of relationships give equal warmness.

I gave and received from my partners. We looked after each other when one was ill. I was both an insertive and a receptive partner because we did not want to let one another take advantage (tang fai tang bo yom sia piab), so we took turns. I prefer being the insertive partner, though. It feels if I am being taken advantage of if I am the receptive partner. I use a condom every time I have sex.

I would consider myself as gay. My colleagues do not know that I am gay. I still want to keep this a secret. When being with friends and colleagues, I would try to act like male - being calm, and not being too loud or being too cheerful. I do not have sex with my students. I can not do that. We can not lead them along this road. We need to teach them to be good persons. I only teach and give them some presentation on HIV/AIDS.

I won’t let my parents know that I have had male partners. I will let them find out by themselves. I think if I tell them straight away, they would not accept. If they are suspicious and ask me, then I would explain to them.
In the near future, I still do not want to be in any relationship, do not want to be in trouble.

In the future, if there is someone who really loves me, I could decide to have a male partner rather than a female partner. I will probably adopt a child from a hospital, or raise and support my nieces or nephews so that they take care of me when I get older.

W

I am 28 years old, from Luang Prabang. I used to live in Vientiane and moved to Luang Prabang with the family when I was 17 years old. I have been kathoey since I was young. My younger brother is also kathoey. My parents blamed me for leading him to be kathoey. Other people said it was fate because my parents were so hostile to me that they ended up having two in the family. When I was young, my friends called me a girl - I was happy.

When I attended Chinese school, my roommate liked me. We watched a sex movie (male and female), and then I gave him oral sex. I took the female role and the boy took the male role. I had a second boyfriend when I was in That Luang. We were in the same class - Grade 5. I gave him oral sex and masturbation. When I moved to a new school, we lost contact.

When I was at 5th year secondary school I started becoming more feminine. My mother could not accept it. When Dad was sleeping, I took all his keys to a shop and made copies. I stole my mother’s money, usually about USD 100 each time. I also opened my mother’s safe with a screwdriver and took a piece of gold. I would fight with my parents a lot. When I was sick of being at home on weekends, I bought an air ticket to go to Vientiane. I had friends and a boyfriend in Vientiane. We went out together.

Whoever I went out with, there would be someone telling my mother, and then she would tell the police to catch us. She would also call my friends’ parents saying, “W is a thief. Do not let her enter your house. Otherwise, I won’t be responsible for anything lost.”

When I was 18 years old, I went to Pattaya with my older sister for a visit. We have relatives there. They took me to a beauty contest and I got second place. I also danced a go-go show there. My older sister has a Thai boyfriend. I met with a man who was a friend of my sister’s boyfriend. We went out together, we got drunk and then we had sex. It was my first anal sex with him. It did not hurt, and we did not use a condom. He wanted me to open a coffee shop with him, but I did not want to because I needed to come back home and go to school.

I had arguments with my mother very often. I was unhappy and decided to leave school when I was at 5th year secondary school, at around 18 years old. Dad took me to work in his bridge construction site so that I would become more like a male. There I needed to work alongside workers and kept records of materials supplied for the construction work.

After dropping out of school, I went out with a boy. My mother told police to catch us. I was very upset. I did not have any way out. I tried to kill myself twice by eating rat poison, but I was taken to the hospital in time. My mother told police to arrest me, and I was in prison many times. The longest time was for a month to be re-educated for stealing. When I was in the prison, my mother told me that if I became a male, she would give me anything I wanted. I told her that if she let me out, I will get ordained for her. When I came out I did not ordain, but escaped to Savannakhet.
In Savannakhet, I stayed with my aunt at Pudoi night club. My aunt encouraged me to dress like a female. I wore a wig and got extra money from serving beer to customers in her shop. The guests thought that I was a female. I got about 100 baht per day. Then I moved to Hoimo port, to stay with other aunts. They loved me and let me do whatever I wanted. I sold beer at their restaurant. When my mother came to visit, I would have to change my clothes back to wearing male clothes. After that, I came back to Luang Prabang. I had more arguments with my mother, so I left to Xiang Khouang. I had a friend. He was into gambling, and he supported me.

Later I returned to Vientiane with another aunt. She was also an out-going person. Both of us went to a beauty contest, and were selected for the semi-final round. My aunt told the committee that she was single. No one knew that I was a man, but my aunt’s husband knew about this and told police to stop us. During that time, we also went to a casino in the evening market. My aunt enjoyed gambling. My mother did not like this aunt. These days, I did not have any sleeping partners.

My mother came to visit and asked me to go back to Luang Prabang to look after the house for her for a week. Then she asked me to stay for a month, and she kept extending her request. Since then, I have stayed with her and we do not fight as frequently as before.

In those days, I would only hang out with girlfriends, not kathoey. I was concerned that people would know that I am kathoey. I did not tell anyone. I even had my ID card changed to say female. I tried to get money from men by deceiving them. I would flirt with them and ask them to buy me things - air tickets, phone cards, etc. - promising to be their girlfriend. When they did, I would just disappear and not see them again. I wanted to sleep with them, but I was afraid that they would know that I am kathoey and then not like me. I was trying to make sure that they liked me a lot before telling them. Of course, they would wonder and suspect why I did not sleep with them. Luang Prabang is a small town. Whatever you do, people know about it. Eventually, they would find out by themselves.

I do not use condoms. If the sperm does not enter into my body, then it would be like I have not gotten the man. It feels good when the men ejaculates. This is how I get pleasure. I want him to keep penetrating for a long time. I want to be the receptive partner. When having sex, quite a few times I ejaculate, too, but my penis is not erected. This is because I take contraception pills. I had been using contraception since I went to Thailand - both oral and injecting types. I brought some from Thailand and got injected here. Now I do not use it anymore. It makes me feel tired.

Before I did not let men touch my penis. Since last year when I joined the beauty contest of PSI, I started making friends with other kathoey. They showed each other their penises. They told me not to be shy, and told me to accept it. Then I think, “Well OK, all kathoey’s penises are erected.” Since then, I am not shy anymore.

Most of the time, I sleep with older people because I figured they have bigger penises. Then I slept with teenagers and found they have big penises, too. So now I will sleep with anyone who has a big penis. I will touch men’s penises from the outside. If I feel that it is small, I lose the mood. Sometimes, if I really want to have sex, I take it anyway... just to find release. When sleeping with students, they ask for money. I give them 2,000-20,000 kip. My sleeping partners
are 13-50 years old. I slept with a foreigner once. He gave me oral sex. I almost died – so much pleasure. If I come into town, I could have about two or three sleeping partners per day. I have sex about three or four times a week, both with new and old partners (if they make it feel good). Now it is easy for me to look for sleeping partners because I am open in public that I am kathoey. Before, I did not have many partners because I was afraid that people would know I am kathoey. Also, I had a boyfriend, so I only slept with him. I want to have sex with men whom I love. If I have a boyfriend, I will only have sex with him. I sleep with many people while seeking a boyfriend, but I doubt if there is even one person out of a hundred that truly loves me.

M

I am 35 years old, born in Champasak. I am now a hairdresser near Vientiane. I lived in Thailand for about 25 years.

After completing high school, I got a scholarship to study nursing at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok for five years. At that time, young people only followed their friends when choosing a subject of studies, and I was one of those. While I studied, I also worked part-time at a department store as a salesman. I slept with 15 women. They were colleagues and some were factory workers. My senior male colleague got a free ticket to Pattaya, so asked me to go along. It was a surprise for me to be asked. In Pattaya, we got drunk and this man “raped” me - he hugged and kissed me, but there was no penetration. I did not feel special about it, but wondered how a man can have sex with another man. After that, I had sex with him several times. I also still slept with women.

Then my friend introduced me to a kathoey. I did not know at first, so I wanted to have sex with her. She was beautiful and we had anal sex. After that, I slept with women, men, and kathoey. It depended on the situation, when I had the mood and who was available.

After graduation, I worked as a volunteer working on HIV/AIDS/STDs projects checking blood. I could understand Vietnamese, Chinese, and some Cambodian. During this time, I also worked as a receptionist at a hotel. I met a Korean girl there. She was a singer and she became my girlfriend. We were in a relationship for one or two years. Later I got married with her because she got pregnant. But there was also a rich guy who liked her and wanted to take care of her and the baby. So I agreed to let her go with him.

Then I went to Pattaya. I injected hormones once week, and could not be under the sun. I only went out during the night. I got the third place at a huge international kathoey beauty contest, and had many shows. There was a beauty contest every year. The new winner would get the crown and the old ones became less popular. I worked in Pattaya for two years.

After that I came back to Laos, and saw an advertisement about a hair contest. I joined the competition and got the first place in Laos. Then I went to a similar competition in Thailand, and again got first place. I received a scholarship to take a course on hairdressing in Japan for three months. When I was in Japan I did not have sleeping partners. Then I got a job as a hairdresser with Grammy Company in Thailand for three years before coming back to Laos.
My sexual role depends on my partners. If I sleep with a real man, I am the receptive partner. When sleeping with kathoey, I am the insertive partner. And when sleeping with gay, I am both the insertive and receptive partner. I use a condom every time I have sex. I learnt this from the medical school and when I was a health volunteer. I prefer young Laotian partners. They are more attractive. Sleeping with young boys is an added benefit in life (kamlai sivid).

Now I have to emotionally prepare myself in case my current boyfriend has a girlfriend. Who knows, if we have a lot of money, we could stay together as three people. No one would say anything to us. I am trying to earn my living and save some money for when I get old. I still do not know what the future will be. When I am 50, I would not do anything. I’d only want to have a field, a garden and an easy, peaceful life.

A

I am a 19-year-old student of Japanese at the university. My father is Thai-Chinese and my mother is Laotian. We used to live in a refugee camp in Thailand. We came back to Laos when my my mother remarried a man who has land in Laos, so I moved back here – to Khammoune province when I was 3 years old. I attended school until Grade 5. After that, I ordained and attended Buddhist secondary school for seven years in Savannakhet, until completing secondary school. When I was 14-15 years old, I had a girlfriend for two weeks. We only kissed and hugged. I was not brave to be too physical with her. I needed to respect her. After completing secondary school, I came to Vientiane to study and was staying with my uncle at first.

Now I have a kathoey partner who is a hairdresser. We live together and run a beauty salon and a sauna. We have been in the relationship for three months. I met M when I went to his shop for a haircut. On my third time coming to the shop, M washed my hair, then touched my body and my genitals. I was scared and shaking. I had heard my friend saying, “Kathoeys have sex forcefully. It hurts. They suck strongly and make you bleed.” Although I was still scared, I came to the shop again as M is the best hairdresser. He can design a very nice hair style for the customers. This time M did not touch my penis, but talked to me nicely instead. Then he told me, “I kidded you because I like and love you. There are many people who come to the shop for haircuts, but I only love you. If you do not mind, let’s try being in a relationship.” I said, “Let’s see.” Then we went to a market and he bought me clothes.

One day, after having a haircut, I went back home to change. I was wearing the new clothes M bought me and we went out for dinner. That night I got so drunk and could not go home so we stayed at M’s place. He was the one who made the first move. He hugged and kissed me. But I was the insertive partner. It just happened naturally. It was my first sex. After that night, we had sex again.

M explained to me about male-male relationships, and told me that he would understand if one day I have a girlfriend and leave him. I moved in to stay with him. M lets me use his motorbike to go to school, gives me money for school fees, and buys me food and clothes. Everyday, we leave the house at the same time. I drop him off at his beauty salon and then I go to school. After finishing classes, I come to help in the shop and we go back home together. If I do not have class, then I work at the shop with him. What I like about M is that he has the character that I want in a lady: warm hearted, gentle, and caring. I think I can not be more lucky than this.
He supports me in everything. My family is poor and they can not give me this level of support. Being with M, I have nothing to lose. I hope later I can support myself.

I want to tell kathoey that men can have true love for them - not only getting money. However, I think most men sleep with kathoey for money. They do not let anyone know that they sleep with kathoey because they are afraid that others would not consider them as 100 percent male. Also, if their girlfriends knew that they sleep with another man, it would end their relationship.

If a male-male relationship is acceptable, I might choose to be with M because he has given me so much, and I want to reciprocate one way or another. If I could have M and a girl at the same time, it would be great. But it won’t be acceptable for the girl. Anyway, if I decide to get married, there must be at least one girl who can accept me. I am still a man because when having sex, I am still the insertive partner...although not 100 percent. One-hundred percent men only sleep with women, but I am not that strongly kathoey. My friends told me about their experiences with females, so I want to try sleeping with a woman, too.

I only want to be an insertive partner with M. I can not accept being a receptive partner. It would be like transgender (tud teo). I think I am not 100 percent male, only 90 percent. Others who have never slept with kathoey may think that a man who sleeps with kathoey are either gay or kathoey. When we have sex, we do not use a condom - only lubricant.

Only a few friends know about our relationship. Some of them asked, and I explained the reasons why we are together so they understand. My parents do not know about us. I do not let them know. I just told them that I am sharing a house with a friend and I am trying to be independent. They would not even realize that men can have sex with men. I think that if they know why we are together that they would accept it.

In the future I will probably get married. I think a man who loves kathoey needs to overcome shame and gossip. But in having a relationship with a woman, she can have children and I do not need to be shy when we socialize with others. Only a man and a woman can form a family. M knows that one day I will have a woman but, even so, we both still feel jealous when one of us is with someone else.