YOUNG PEOPLE AND HIV IN CAMBODIA - MEANINGS, CONTEXTS AND SEXUAL CULTURES

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Like many other countries in South East Asia, Cambodia is experiencing a rapidly developing AIDS epidemic. Groups reported as being particularly seriously affected include sex workers and their clients. Young people too may be at heightened risk: some young women find sex work a lucrative option in the context of low wages and poor employment opportunities, and some young men pay for sex either as individually or as part of group socializing. These same young men may subsequently have sex with other partners, thus extending networks of transmission. While there is limited knowledge about the form of such sexual networks, little is known about the meanings that underpin young people's sexual relations and partnerships, sexual identities associated with such meanings, and prevailing socio-sexual cultures. This paper reports on findings from an indepth qualitative study conducted among two groups of young people: one urban, the other rural. Following an initial Rapid Assessment Process, data was collected via individual interviews, focus group interviews and participant observation. The research team included young people themselves. Data is presented on dominant discourses about sex and sexuality in Cambodia; contemporary patterns of sexual behaviour; sexual meanings and sexual practices; sexual relations among young people involving payment; sexual relations not involving payment. The implications for more effective HIV prevention efforts are discussed, along with the disadvantages of ensuring that young people are active participants in the research process.

Keywords: Young People Adolescents HIV/AIDS Sexual Cultures Cambodia
In 1989 when the first author returned to Cambodia after an enforced absence of just over fourteen years, she met the then Minister of Public Health. He asked if she thought AIDS was likely to become a problem in Cambodia. She looked at him, thinking that, with so many other immediate problems (not least the need to reach agreement between the warring parties to more than two decades of civil war), AIDS would not be all that important. That she could be so wrong, would only come home later.

By the end of 1996, 6936 cases of HIV infection and 266 cases of AIDS had been reported in Cambodia. Sixty sex people, including three children, had died. Estimates of the rate of infection are, however, much higher and an estimated 70,000 to 120,000 people are most probably living with HIV in Cambodia today. Significantly about 90 percent of the people infected are 15-35 years old. (National AIDS Programme, 1996). By 2000 according to moderate World Health Organization estimates, more than 10,000 adults annually will be dying of AIDS and there will be 4,000 HIV-related TB cases (World Health Organization, 1996)

Among those reported as being most affected are sex workers and their clients, as well as increasing numbers of young people in their early to mid twenties. It has been estimated that more than one-third of all Cambodian sex workers have contacted HIV, but unfortunately there is still no adequate empirical data available on infection rates among clients. Likewise the National AIDS Programme has not yet been able to develop a reliable data base on young people. Given the potential expansion of the epidemic among younger people, as well as the need to develop more effective interventions for prevention, research is needed to better understand HIV-related risks among members of this age group. This paper describes findings from a two year qualitative

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1. Given the difficulty of obtaining reliable estimates of HIV and its transmission, these figures should be regarded as estimates only.

2. It is important to recognize that the categories ‘sex workers’, ‘clients’ and ‘young people’ are not mutually exclusive and that young people in Cambodia (particularly young women) may fund sex work lucrative in the absence of other sources of employment. Additionally, many young men visit sex workers occasionally or regularly, some of them may be their contemporaries in terms of age and perhaps background.
study of young people's sexual beliefs lives and behaviours supported by the World Health Organisation's then Global Programme on AIDS and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.3

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The late 1980s witnessed a veritable explosion of studies that sought to measure AIDS related knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and practices, and which set out to enumerate the frequency with which particular sexual acts took place among people of different ages and of different social groups (see, for example, Cleland and Ferry, 1995 in developing countries and Johnson, Wadsworth and Wellings (1994) and Spira, Bajos et al (1992) in the developed world). This style of investigation is, however, limited in terms of the information it can provide (Cleland and Ferry, 1995: 24-27, 220-224), particularly in relation to the promotion of sexual and reproductive health including HIV prevention:

For example, while these studies can tell us much about the relative frequency with which certain sexual acts occur - particularly those that it is more acceptable to talk openly about - they tell us less about what these acts mean to the people concerned; Are they seen, for example, as acts of love or duty or obligation, are they enjoyed or are they seen as demeaning, are they pleasurable or are they felt to be unpleasant, are they seen as ‘safe’ or ‘risky’, and so on?!

Furthermore, while useful for monitoring population level effects of broad-based interventions for prevention, such studies may be less efficient in accessing the more hidden world within which sex most usually takes place. An important distinction can be made between the official accounts people may give of sex-related desires and practices and those that are more privately held. This is especially true of heavily stigmatized or taboo sexual practices such as sex between men or sex between women, but it is also the case for sexual practices identified as ‘risky’ by HIV/AIDS public information programmes and activities.

Third, these styles of enquiry of kind tell us little about the sexual identities that people have - be they those offered by biomedicine and sexology (e.g. heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual

3 The views expressed are those of the authors alone and should not necessarily be construed as those of either the World Health Organisation of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.
etc), or those constituted in more local vernaculars. They are therefore limited when it comes to offering the means whereby to address people meaningfully, and in ways likely to maximise the success of HIV prevention efforts.

Finally, they shed little light on local sexual cultures or forms of sexual life; the norms, beliefs and expectations linked to these, and the practices that constitute sexuality as it is experienced and lived in particular contexts and settings. Without this kind of information, we run the risk of devising intervention programmes in developing countries that are founded on Western; mechanistic and unduly rationalistic models sexual relations.’

The study reported on in this paper, along with others supported by the World Health Organisation and UNAIDS - two in the Americas (Costa Rica and Chile), two in Africa (Zimbabwe and the Cameroon) and two in Asia (in Papua New Guinea and the Philippines) aimed to explore in greater depth than hitherto, sexual beliefs, sexual ideologies, sexual practices and sexual cultures among young people.’ Principal research questions concerned (i) the meanings of sexual activities and sexualities (including how young people learn about sex and sexuality; sources of knowledge, values and attitudes; feelings and thoughts about sexuality, including expectations about sexual relations); (ii) the contexts of sex (including the social, emotional and physical contexts within which sex occurs, expectations about particular contexts; reported obligations and expectations; differing, perception of vulnerability; and socially approved/disapproved sexual activities) and (iii) specific sexual behaviours and activities. A fuller specification of the aims of objectives of the research programme as a whole can be found in WHO (1993).

LOCAL CONTEXT

Social enquiry on HIV and AIDS most usually has at least two sources of origin: those that are generic and which link to the paradigms, theoretical frameworks and research questions

4 But see Ingham and van Zessen (19997) for a critique of the application of such models in ‘Western’ contexts.

5 A further two investigation have been carried out in Britain and in the Netherlands using other funds.
that establish a particular terrain of enquiry; and those that are more pragmatic, linking to efforts to find a solution to specific problems in the fields of prevention and/or care.

Generic-concerns

Beyond the issues already discussed, the origins of this study can be traced to more broader efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s to reformulate knowledge about sexuality within constructionist and post-modernist frameworks that recognised the culturally and historically specific character of sexual conduct and its study. This challenged both universalist conceptions of the sexual, as well as, the privileged status of 'scientific' inquiry within the study of sex and sexuality. By the early 1990s, it had became clear that if sex research was going to make an important contribution to the fight against HIV/AIDS it would have to focus not only on the incidence of particular attitudes and practices, but on the social and cultural contexts in which sexual activity is shaped and constituted (Parker, 1994). The emphasis shifted therefore from sexual behaviour, in and of itself, to the cultural rules which organise it. Special emphasis was to be accorded to analysing the local or indigenous categories and systems of classification that structure and define sexual experience in different social and cultural contexts. This focus on local categories and classifications necessitated a broader shift from 'outsider' to `insider' perspectives.

Understanding sexual cultures on their own terms was and is not simply question of ensuring that indigenous peoples (be they in developed or developing countries) undertake their own research, ibis to shift the foots from, the sexual actions or specific bodies, to the cultural and social contexts in which sexuality finds expression (Tuzin, 1991; Vance, 1991. Several important collections of essays bear witness to these trends (Herdt and Lindenbaum, 1992; ten Brummelhuis and Herdt, 1995; Gagnon and Parker, 1995). Describing work in contexts as diverse as the Philippines (Tan, 1995), Haiti (de Zelduondo and Bernard, 1995; Nigeria (Orubuloye, 1995) and Brazil (Paiva, 1995), they attempts to move beyond received notions of sexuality and the sexual, to interrogate the meanings that underpin sexual acts and differing modes of sexual expression, and the social contexts in which these arise.

The discussion in this and subsequent paragraphs follows the excellent review offered in Gagnon and Parker’s Introduction to Conceiving Sexuality (Parker and Gagnon, 1995).
Pragmatic implications

It is impossible to understand risk-related sexual behaviours without appreciating the social and contextual nature of such behaviours. Unfortunately, this has not been the emphasis present in the majority of studies conducted in Cambodia to date. As has already been suggested, these most usually have been dominated by narrowly epidemiological or behavioural considerations, taking meanings associated with ‘sex’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘risk’ as unproblematic, and thereby offering an overly simplistic image of the epidemic. This image most usually suggests that the major cause of HIV transmission is sex work, and through men’s relations with female sex workers. Via the clients of sex workers, HIV is then assumed to pass to wives and other regular partners, rendering the population more generally at risk. According to such an analysis, intervention efforts are best targeted at women sex workers and their male clients in efforts to break one of the first links in the chain of transmission, a view that until very recently has strongly influenced the intervention strategies of the National AIDS Programme (National AIDS Programme, 1994).

By focusing primarily on young men who are prepared to pay women for sexual services, women who provide sex for reasons other than money or payment in kind, and men who also have sex with these women, remain largely hidden. This study explores the possibility that the position of young, unmarried women is more complicated than dominant discourses would suggest. Likewise, it shows that same sex experiences do occur among young Cambodians, although they are rarely if ever understood as ‘homosexuality’, at least within Western frameworks and definitions. These are issues that many public health officials and health professionals find it difficult to deal with, and areas which pose challenges for any reorientation of contemporary HIV prevention efforts.

METHODS

Fieldwork took place over a fifteen month period between February, 1995 and April 1996. It involved data collection and analysis coordinated by the first author and conducted by a multidisciplinary team including graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, representatives of the Cambodian National AIDS Programme, and workers from local non-governmental organisations. Additionally, a small group of young people from
a local secondary school were recruited to facilitate access to young people themselves, and to assist in data collection and analysis. All were paid for their involvement in the study and participated in research training workshops and other activities.

The first stage of the fieldwork involved an initial six week rapid Assessment Process (RAP) conducted in Phnom Penh and adjacent areas. The aims of the RAP - which was conducted by means of key informant interviews, analysis of available documentary evidence, participant observation by the principal investigator, and liaison with local NGOs - was to sensitise members of the research team to the issues that might need to be explored, possible constraints on site and respondent selection and other difficulties that might need to be overcome during the main study. Following the RAP, main data collection commenced using three principal research methods - observation, individual interviews and focus group discussions (Agar and MacDonald, 1-995).

Fieldwork took place in two sites - one urban (Phnom Penh) and the other rural (a rural district some 30 kms from Phnom Penh). Sites were chosen so as to allow for the possibility that there might be important differences in sexual meanings and cultures in urban and rural settings (as well as potential similarities), and to allow some exploration of the impact of modernisation and economic reform on more traditional sexual systems and structures.

A total of 281 young people aged 14 to 26 in two contrasting sites participated in individual interviews. 123 of these (71 men and 52 women) were interviewed in Phnom Penh and the remainder in the selected villages (75 men and 83 women). Fifteen focus group discussions took place, and data was collected from a further 62 older informants - parents, teachers, monks and government officials. Interview schedules were semi-structured in their design and addressed

7 it cannot be stressed too strongly how under-developed is the present social science research infrastructure in Cambodia today. In consequence the few social studies on HIV and AIDS, that have been carried out have been conducted either by 'outsiders' (both individuals and agencies), or by those trained in biomedical disciplines such as epidemiology and public health. There are virtually no studies conducted by indigenous Khmer researchers or research teams, a deficiency this investigation sought to remedy.

8 For reasons of confidentiality we have chosen not to identify the rural district that this study was conducted in.
lifestyle and social networks
sexual norms and dominant values
respondent’s own sexual history
first ever sexual intercourse
details of subsequent sexual relationships
issues such as pressure to have intercourse or alternatives to intercourse
knowledge and awareness of HIV
knowledge and awareness of pregnancy
condom use

Older informants were asked about young people having sexual relations, were there circumstances in which it is unacceptable, acceptable, what effect does age have, and is it different for young males and females. Teachers were asked to comment on such issues in the context of classroom teaching, parents in relation to their own children and other children they knew of, and community leaders in the context of young people in general. In focus group discussions, greater emphasis was placed on lifestyle(s) and social networks, sexual norms and dominant values. We deliberately sought to avoid using focus groups to examine individual sexual histories.

Respondents were assured of anonymity, and all interviews were conducted in Khmer. Detailed notes were kept during interviews, which were also tape recorded and transcribed. Data analysis aimed to identify recurrent issues and themes in the accounts given, and areas of possible ambiguity were discussed, collectively by members of the research team so as to arrive at consensus on their interpretation. WHO/GPA and UNAIDS provided technical assistance to the study by post, telephone and fax, as well as through a series of study implementation visits.

In the following sections we will discuss findings from the various elements of the study, focusing first on dominant discourses about sexuality as revealed through documentary evidence, key informant interviews and work with young people themselves. These establish a backcloth against which to understand, present patterns of sexual behaviour; sexual meanings and sexual belief and sexual practices in both sex work and non sex work contexts. This latter data elicited through individual and focus group interviews with young people themselves, and through participant observation in contexts identified as important by study respondents.
DOMINANT DISCOURSES ABOUT SEXUALITY IN CAMPODIA

One of the most widely known aspects of gender symbolism in Cambodia appears in the often quoted proverb; *prous preap douch pick, srey preap douch knornath* (men are like gold, women are like cotton). This statement implies a sexual double standard that works against all Cambodian females, and most especially against younger women. The existence of this proverb has been seized upon by numerous ‘partial ethnographers’ of Cambodian sexual cultures, whether they be local Cambodians trained in medical science, or non-Cambodians working for the increasing number of NGOs in the field of AIDS prevention (see, for example, Phan and Patterson, 1993). It supposedly explains why, without losing status or honour, young Cambodian men can pay for sexual services or seduce young women who succumb to their charms. Had the discourses been read more fully, it would have been found that another more egalitarian aspect of gender symbolism appears in the proverb, *somnab young dey srey young prous* (the rice gives the soil that cultivated appearance and the soil helps cultivate the rice seeds). In a country where eighty-five percent of the population work in the countryside, where do men and women not work alongside one another in the ricefields? Clearly, in the field of gender relations, things are more complicated than they first appear.

In the world of the supernatural well known to all native Cambodia, there are *preay*, the spirits of women who died while still virgins, whether by suicide, accident, or violence; or the spirits of women who died during childbirth. Such spirits are widely believed to cause epidemics (Ang Choulean, 1996; Ledgerwood, 1990). The preay are voracious, greedy, sexually avaricious, and capricious. While it is possible to placate these spirits, there is no assurance that they will not both consume the offering and continue to inflict injury. The malevolent power of the *preay krormom* (a virgin spirit that attempts to seduce young men), for example, come insatiable sexual desire that all virgins are thought to have.

At another level are myths associated with *phor sok* or rice goddess, which involve her giving up her flesh and blood to nurture the human world. One day, however, as the myth folds, a young, unmarried couple were making love amongst the maturing rice crop and during coitus remarked to one another that *phor sok* was silly to sacrifice herself for the human world, and that she too should enjoy sexual activity. On overhearing this remark she is appeared, and
the young couple, through crushing the rice she had been carefully nurturing, caused famine and ultimately chaos in the village. To entice her back, a symbolic fish or treay kompleang was sent to look for her, but she agreed to return only if rituals were held to honour her at critical phases in the cycles associated with the cultivation of rice (Poree-Maspero, 1969).

At a meta-level, this myth suggests that sexual activity among young unmarried people, male and female alike, is to be opposed. That is what nearly all of the sixty-two older informants (parents, teachers, monks and government officials) interviewed for this study also felt, although many felt they were fighting a losing battle to make young people respect the traditions they feel comfortable with. To explain their opposition to sexual activity among young, unmarried people, these same older people often invoked the argument that Buddhism in the Cambodia they used to be familiar with (i.e. Cambodia prior to the 1970s), would frown upon both premarital and, extramarital sex, such forms of sexual activity being looked upon as barp) (sinful) (see, for example, Keyes, 1984; Kirsch, 1984). However, the society these old people ‘imagine’ they were familiar with prior to 1970 was also a society where the sexual ventures of young men at village level would be treated lightly compared to the loss of virginity by unmarried women that would cause 'great shame' and 'bad-smelling’ talk (Ebihara, 1974: 314-315).

In dominant Khmer discourses on sexuality, there also exists the ideal virgin woman known as srey grap lakkhana, who is represented as sexually naive and timid around males. She walks so that her ‘hips do not swing’, 'sits modestly', never 'laughs foolishly', and keep her hair up because if she leaves her 'hair loose and flowing', it is like a 'cat hiding its claws'. This perfectly virtuous woman must take great care never to signal improper attentions to a man (Ledgerwood, 1994). The latter on the other hand, is drawn to women just, as kumdak skorchit srormouch (ants are attracted to sugar) and cannot avoid becoming involved in sexual mishap.

While young women are implored not to believe the sweet words of young men, the latter often emerge as successful prean neari (woman hunters) and earn considerable status from successfully seducing either a young virgin woman who is unmarried, or the spouse of some other man.

Literature has something to remind all young women of what awaits those foolish enough to lose their virginity before marriage. The story of Nam Khaki written in 1813, but often retold
tells of what happens to young women who sleep with many men, enjoy such activity, or are even accused of having multiple sexual partners. The story ends with Khaki's husband, the king, putting her on a raft and pushing her out to sea. A more modern novel from the 1960s is *Suphat* in which Suya, a seventeen year old married woman is abandoned after being made pregnant by her male lover. This is her reward for the naivety and ignorance that all young women should ideally have: Similar sentiments are expressed in some contemporary songs, for instance *Plas chit sneeh* (A Change of Heart towards Love) which identifies the consequences of *prorkul prumcharey choon bong* or *sok chet batbang peap borsut* (surrendering- one's virginity) to the pros sava or avaser (promiscuous one).°

Dominant discourses about sexuality in Cambodia are therefore best characterised by conflict, in which young women are expected to do everything in their power to resist the sexual advances of young men while, regardless of what they themselves do, men avoid condemnation for their actions. Indeed, some may even have their status enhanced by the seductive powers evidenced by their sexual liaisons with young unmarried women. Dominant discourses have little difficulty speaking to such sexual inequalities, but they are not the inequalities we find in the more modern discourses on sexual equality enshrined in the human rights instruments imposed on the new Cambodian government in 1993 as a condition for greater recognition by the international community. Instead, they seem more timeless, more 'natural' and more 'inherent' inequalities. Do these discourses offer insight into the actual sexual lives and cultures of young Cambodians today?

° This song, by the female singer Oun Sophal, who was interviewed for this study, and translated by the Cambodian author of this paper, goes something like this:

*We women are all like flowers.*
*All meet have the desire for the freshness of the first bloom*
*Likewise when they see us in full puberty with a beautiful face that shines*
*with charm, these men know how to make love with seduction*

*Once they have gone to 'heaven', they have deflowered us, this relationship has become a bridge to hell on earth*
*Their sweetened words become the most vicious cruelty as they strive for new lover*
*Lesson to learn, are never to experience the love game*
*When you meet time promiscuous one like this, you will always become a chronicle sufferer*
*So we must stay alone, because we have tire freedom*
*The love betrayed is a love bitter and sour*

*But the genuine words of real love are like the taste of honey*
*Now the heart must be as hard as a rock, so that lout will not be without destiny*
Pattern of Sexual Behaviour

Two hundred and eighty-one young people between the age of 14 and 26 years of age were interviewed by members of the research team. One hundred and thirty five respondents were young women, of whom forty were prepared to identify themselves as sexually active, having had at least one experience of penetrative vaginal sex (none described anal or oral sexual penetration). Thirty two of these sought or wanted a long-term relationship with their male lover. None practised any form of safe sex, taken as meaning negotiating with their male partners to use a condom or consider other forms of sexual activity such as mutual masturbation that are much safer if not a prelude to penetration.

Of the 146 young men interviewed, 128 claimed to have experienced penetrative sex at least once, whether with a sex worker, their young female lover, married or widowed women, or in a smaller number of instances with other: males, either of the same age or sometimes a lot older than themselves. Of this 128 young men, 45 were adamant that they would never wear a condom whether having paid sex or otherwise, 83 claimed they would sometimes use a condom if having paid sex but never with young women with whom considerations of sexual pleasure were interwoven with those of love and romance, or with older women who might be married or widowed.

Overall, 29.6% of young women and 87.6% of young men have placed themselves potentially at risk by their refusal, reluctance or inability to practise safer forms of sex. While we should be cautious in generalising from findings such as these, being based as they are upon a group of young people selected for their willingness to participate in the study, they nevertheless offer some indication of the enormity of the HIV-related problems facing young people in Cambodia today.

Were such findings extrapolated to all young women and men in the age group 14 years to 26 years, using figures provided in the according to the Socio-Economic Survey Of Cambodia, 1993/94 (Ministry of Planning, 1995: 29), more than 380,000 young females would have exposed themselves to risk-related forms of sexual activity and more than 978,000 young males would be in the same position.
Sexual Meanings and Sexual Practices

It should come as little surprise to learn that the overwhelming majority of young men's early sexual contacts were motivated by considerations such as does kuoy (the release of semen) or ruam lob (sex for pleasure). Many young male respondents talked also of chuch srey or vay. sex, terms which literally translated mean 'fucking the woman', but which carry with them connotations of sex with young women likely to be frequent 'red-light' districts, bars, nightclubs, coffee shops and now increasingly places of entertainment such as snooker saloons. Such females are referred to as srey kouch (damaged' girl), srey bon (brothel girl), or srey bar (bar girl), but there are many other terms as well. With such women, young Cambodian men reported being able to try any number of sexual positions; from having the woman sitting astride the male, known as angkuy chhis ses leng (sitting on the horse and having the hands free), to rear entry vaginal but not anal penetration, known as cham tit (bottom up), such positions being very popular with a number of the young males interviewed for this study.

Male respondents also described a variety of oral and anal forms of sex. Oral forms included see karem (eating icecream), beam karem (sucking the icecream), see sach krork (eating raw sausage), see vatok boran (eating the artefact) and beam line (perhaps best translated as blow job). All of these were reportedly more popular than anal sex, which is often portrayed as something dirty, as reflected in the terms used to describe the practice - tveu roon achh (to do by the shit hole) and sne har tam roon koot (love through the arsehole) Two other terms used for anal sex - teuv boh steung (throw in the river) and teuv boh bongkuol (to plant the post) - are somewhat less negative.

The other terms include: srey samphing (sluttish girl), srey kangouk meas (golden pheasant girl) srey pkar meas (golden flower girl also known as srey pesiya), srey me ambou (butterfly girl), srey treuv kar te luy (girl who only wants money), srey chay te robos mei check auy (the girl who sells the ‘heritage’ given to her by her parents) and srey rouk see of deum (the girl who earns without repute).

Whether these terms have much popular currency is less important than the fact that in certain contexts among some young people they are used to refer to a range of sexual activities, which may or may not be risk-related, that have some meaning for these young people. This language might not be used in ordinary, polite or public discourse, but the reality is that it exists at this point in the time and to be recognised as such. The cultural interlocutors in this instance are not just all young people but those who understand and use this language.
Visits to sex workers were part of the normal routine for the majority of urban young men interviewed. To a certain extent, this was also true of young men in the rural areas as well, being seen as an integral part of peer group socialising, and often carried out in groups. Certainly most of the young males interviewed in Phnom Penh reported visiting places like Svay Pak, Toul Kork, Khien Svay and Kep Thmei. Members of a focus group conducted at the University of Fine Arts described *srey bon* calling out to them *rouk srey te bong?* (do you want a woman?), *vai sex chuy muoy?* (do you want a fuck?), *khuy srey to bong?* (do you want to use your cock to open me?) and *kuos muoy le bong* (do you want to dig with the hoe?), as they rode their motorcycles through Tuol Kork. Visits to sex workers in these districts also took the form of group quasi-initiations, such as in the case of Khieu, a 22 year-old music student who claimed he had sex with sex workers because his friends told him that any future wife would look down upon him if ‘he could' not tell whether she was a virgin or not.'

The sexual practices between young men and sex workers described, along with associated meanings, display a number of important characteristics. First, it is important to note that they differ considerably from those with potential marriage partners or songsar (regular lovers). With the partners of the latter kind, sexual communication must proceed in relation to material (dower payments) and symbolic values (honour and prestige) that are not present, relations with sex workers. Moreover, with a potential marriage partner, sex is usually a more private act. Having sex in the companionship of his peers is something no young man: would contemplate with a young woman who was not a sex worker, although some might like to, boast about the successful seduction of a young woman who might at a later date turn out to be a songsar.

Second, it is important to recognise that among the young men interviewed the majority of acts involving payment took place with women sex workers. This is not to say that

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14 These arc places in and around Phnom Penh where recreational sexual activities often take place. Svay Pak on the outskirts of Phnom Penh and Toul Kork in the northern area of Phnom Penh, *both*, being sites where large numbers of sex workers can be found. Khien Svay and Kep Thmei are areas that family groups also often visit during the weekends or on public holidays. However, sex workers can also be found at both these sites as well, albeit somewhat more discreetly than at either Khien Svay or Tuol Kork.

15 A peasant metaphor for sex, not widely understood by urban Cambodians.
homosexual relations do not exist among young Cambodian men, but it is to chart the dominant forms taken by sex for payment or other material reward. Transgendered kteuy exist in Cambodia and male respondents did occasionally report having sexual relations with them. For example, leng a 23 year-old law student described how kteuy. ...know how to suck your nipples, tongue your penis and then scream with pleasure when you insert your penis.... more skilfully than any sex worker, but he still intends getting married to a nice woman as this is the 'normal' thing to do.

In contrast, and while emphasis was placed on the pleasurable 'release of semen' in many of the young, men's accounts of their experiences with sex workers, it is interesting to observe that self masturbation is considered a second rate activity.

The only ethnographic study which addresses the linkages between the kteuy and gay sexual cultures among Cambodians in Karen Quintiliani's excellent 1995 study of Cambodian Americans living in Long Beach. Some of these Cambodian American gay males have lovers back in Cambodia, but while we can easily recognise the kteuy in local Cambodian ethnography, it is far more difficult to talk of a local Cambodian gay sexual culture. Whether this will change remains to be seen, although if we look at the experience of neighbouring Thailand where there is little hostility towards a growing gay sexual culture, then perhaps the same might occur here.

In this study more than twenty young men described same sex activities in which they had participated. These occurred in a variety of contexts including in a Buddhist temple with a monk, 'rapod' by a kru paet (non-graduated medical worker) working at the village level, with an expatriate male working for an international development organisation, and with older kteuy who liked younger males, although not all of them considered these experiences to be always exciting or pleasurable.

Make masturbation is treated quite ambiguously by the young Cambodians interviewed. Terms such as prior chuk, (to pump yourself), leng.klaun eng (to play with yourself), kan ple truap kloun eng (to hold your eggplant by yourself), and kan karen kloun eng (to hold the icecream by yourself). carry connotations of sexual pleasure but little sexual potency. There is some sense of power and pleasure in the term dong poi-thaw (to hold the axe-handle) but this appears negated in the term kan kam plueng bagn tik (to hold the gun that shoots water). In Cambodia where there are many guns that shoot real bullets, this; might be conceived as a child's game. Real males shoot AK-47s, not plastic replicas that only wet things.

Interestingly, the young women interviewed claimed to know tittle or nothing about female Masturbatio, although some could describe what they thought constituted a female orgasm, sabbay dol kompoul (literally, pleasure which reaches the peak) However the Khmer language admits of two phrases which strongly imply that females can also masturbate or at least stimulate their own genitalia. To leng tapouk means to play with the vagina, while if you ask, veur rormuos reu-avey? You are asking does it itch or not? Phrase that have not widely appeared in Cambodian sexual discourses in recent years. It is perhaps interesting to note that while exploring the latter issues with respondents, who displayed little reticence in discussing them with same sex peer interviewers, one senior member of, the Project Advisory Group commented that the Cambodian author was not thinking like a Cambodian' since medical texts do not acknowledge female masturbation'
A third set of issues relate to the tendency for young men to blame (retrospectively at least) their risk-related behaviour on excessive alcohol use. There is a paradox here, however, since some of these same young men also stated they were unable to sustain an erection or simply forgot to use a condom, when they were drunk. Be such explanations as they may, the reality is that advertising --- most notably of the locally manufactured Angkor beer with the catchy nationalist slogan 'Our Country, Our Beer', and also the single largest private sector employer in Cambodia ---glamorizes the consumption of alcohol and links it to symbols of high social status.

The effects of such advertising are given greater potency by the large number of srey beer employed partly on a commission basis by companies to sell and serve beer in restaurants. While few young males claimed they could afford to pay to have sex with the srey beer, their young and glamorous appearance symbolises what the consumption of alcohol could in theory do for young men. In the light of the above evidence it would be unwise to blame the consumption of alcohol per se for the high incidence of risk-related sexual behaviour among young Cambodian men.

While those familiar with Cambodian society prior to the recent rise of the market economy and ostensibly greater degrees of political pluralism; might sense that change has become more visible, not all the meanings and contexts described above can be wholly linked to the socio economic and political changes of the 1990s. Men could pay for sexual services for much of the latter part of the 1980s. and they could certainly do so before 1975. It was during the time of Pol Pot and in the immediate aftermath, that such practices became more difficult. The near total control exercised over Cambodian people during the late 1970s suppressed all alternative forms of cultural life, including what might be described as alternative sexual cultures.

Interestingly before the arrival of United Nations forces (UNTAC) in 1992, alcohol was not marketed in this fashion. What little marketing of alcohol that was done before 1993 was associated with the 'privileges' supposedly enjoyed by higher status political cadres in the quasi-Marxist Cambodian People's Party which enjoyed a monopoly on political power in Cambodia after the Pol Pot regime was overthrown in early 1979.
Sex not involving payment

What many Cambodians find more difficult to accept and understand are the situations in, which young Cambodian men have unpaid sex with young Cambodian women with whom they may be in a romantic relationship, or with older married and widowed females. It is to these contexts we will now turn.

Forty young women in this study --ranging from age 14 at the time of first intercourse (a respondent aged 18 years at the time of the study, but who claimed to have lost her virginity to a 24 year-old medical student who subsequently abandoned her) to age 22 (a respondent who first had sex with a male while transplanting rice far away from her home village) -- were prepared to talk about their experiences with members of the research team. Others, including the youngest female interviewed -- a 13 year-old studying English -- were willing to talk about their sexual fantasies and desires. In tier case, this involved making love with a 26 year-old male in the same private class.

In contrast to the young men interviewed, young women in Cambodia do not go out in groups seeking recreational sex as part of their regular socialising activities. Indeed, few young women who are not offering sexual services in exchange for monetary payment or 'payment-in kind' are likely to be found on their own, or in small or large groups at bars and nightclubs either in Phnom Penh or adjacent rural areas. Likewise, there were absolutely no instances of young women paying to have sex with either young or older males.20

Where large numbers of young women can be found without older chaperones, are at the numerous private classes conducted by teachers to supplement their incomes outside of regular classroom hours, and where young people may learn something like English or acquire word processing skills. Young women in groups also get the opportunity to meet young men during the

20 The only instances we came across in this study of women prepared to offer a degree of material support was that provided by married female who had sex with younger men and to an even lesser extent not at least because of poverty, widowed females who also chose to have sex with young males.
Cambodian New Year when games like chewing are played, or during the numerous religious and cultural festivals held throughout the year, both in urban Phnom Penh and in the countryside.

To explain why most of the forty young women lost their virginity prior to marriage, we need to understand better what is meant by two opposing yet complementary concepts in necessarily to sexualised forms of love. It is possible to love one's songsar, or lover, as indeed it is possible to love one's parents or other people, but if young women talk about sexualised forms of love they are more likely to refer to notions, associated with the term sne'har. Two-thirds of the young, urban women interviewed said they had a lover they were kou songsar (going out) with. However, this was an emotional attachment unrelated to sexual activity. For relationships that were more physical in nature, the term kou sne'ltar would often be used, although those without penetrative sexual experience would describe actions such as kissing on the cheek or hugging from behind, images that are often reproduced in local movie and television productions, when talking about what was implied by the term sne'har.

Many of the sexually experienced forty young women interviewed found that kou sne'har turned out to be less than positive experience for them. One 20 year-old, for example, who agreed at the age of 18 to make love with her songsar (after a twelve month relationship and after convincing herself that they were about to be married), was upset to discover that he subsequently walked out on her, describing her to his friends as mahop del-ker (unwanted food). At the time of interview, she felt that all the men she knew only wanted short-term relationships with young women.

21 Here, a krama (typical Cambodian scarf) is rolled into a little ball and thrown by either boy or girl to a member of the other sex, the other party trying to catch the karma if they like the thrower.

22 Once again it is interesting to note that there were disputes older members of the Project Advisory Group over the meaning of the term sne'har One male member claimed that sne'har had nothing to do with love in Cambodian culture, except in a highly literary context, and that to talk about sne'har was to focus only on sexual activity and not on love and romance: The argument here is, that while such a term may also belong to the literary discourses of Cambodian culture, contrary to what some adults may believe it also belongs to the discursive practices of young Cambodians in Phnom Penh and outlying districts today.

23 Interestingly, the young men interviewed did not conceive of their paid sexual relationships involving an element of sne'har. For them, this is something special and discreet that exists between two lovers.
Phonnary, another 17 year-old decided, after a failed love affair that ended in her mate sexually assaulting her, to enter into a sexual relationship with a 'kinder and gentler who often took pity on her, giving her 5,000 Riels for food. At one level, this might be seen as an informal rendering of sexual services in return for an ad hoc form of monetary payment, although this 17 year-old vehemently denied she was a grey born or grey bar, preferring to describe herself instead as a young woman from a relatively poor background in the countryside.

In a sense though, she is a little different from Wanee, another 18 year-old, also originally from the countryside, who entered into a variety of sexual relationships, including one with a divorced teacher with whom she had a child, and whose sexual relationships were not condemned by her impoverished mother, the latter hoping that her daughter could improve the material living standards of both of them. Love and romance did not feature in any of her sexual relationships.

Nearly every young person interviewed agreed with a 50 year-old female peasant key informant who argued that the Bombak muk kruasar (face of the family) or vong trorkaul poch ambou (taking care of the family reputation) are important status considerations that Cambodian families have to consider. Only one young female, a 17 year-old student at working at a snooker saloon after becoming pregnant following a sexual relationship with a man in his mid-20s, argued she would not listen to any older people, including her father, after her bitter experiences with men.

Even Heng one of the most arvarser/avaser (promiscuous) male respondents by his own reckoning, and a prean narei (woman-hunter) according to all his friends; argued that he would eventually 'give up (his) evil fucking ways and get his mother to find him a, nice girl.'

It is important to re cognise, however, that most of the young women in this study would not permit the situations described above to develop. Chantha a 17 year-old in grade ten claimed that she has been going out with same songsar far more than two years but knows that her parents have selected a cousin, who at the time of her being interviewed was in the United States, to get married to her. She accepts this decision as does her lover (at least according to her) who she has told she 'might meet in the next life'. She comes from a family with considerably more social and economic status than most of the young women who identified themselves as non virgins, and in this instance the prospect of being married to a Cambodian living overseas might.
be quite appealing because it holds out economic and cultural possibilities not available to most local Cambodian.  

Another 19 year-old who had just failed the grade eleven exam described how she was in the process of divesting herself of a high school boyfriend because he wanted to have sex with her. She argued that should she agree it would mean that she would have no honour left and her family would feel great shame. For her, further study and employment were greater priorities than having with a songsar, outside Phnom Penh, a 17 year-old whose family grow flood recession rice during the dry season and market fresh fish during the wet season; reported that she asked her mother, to delay her marriage until she had an attempt at passing the matriculation examination. Apparently, her mother agreed offering an illustration of a process of negotiation in a rural context that might not have occurred before the 1990s.

Throughout this analysis it should be recognised that we are not talking about the 'abstract' sexual individuals of a modern industrialised society but young Cambodians who also have to make sexual choices in the context of arranged marriages. These arranged marriages have somewhat more to do with considerations of property and access to those with influence, than they do with love and romance. Status considerations feature very prominently in most potential marital relationships and to tign kharnslar or choon kharnslar (literally to buy or bring betel nut; but in reality to offer both 'symbolic' and 'material' thing: to cement a marriage) is a recognised cultural practice among all ethnic Khmer (Ebihara, 1974; Tarr, 1986). As a result, virginity is a commoditised symbol. It still means much to most Cambodians, young or old, and the whole society still has a 'stake' in the virginity of young women, although as this study illustrates there is a real disjuncture for many between the dominant symbolism and what they have done in practice. However, the mamus ton sarnei ('modern' man), which in the urban context implies someone with a car; villa, mobile telephone and a sar'em (olive but- not dark) complexion, has already made his appearance. His female counterpart has yet to fully emerge but we can see her silhouette in the media. The 1990s is commoditising cultural life in a manner without parallel in the Cambodian society of the past:

24 Whether young Cambodians living in places such as Long Beach or Lowell in the United States place quite the same value on virginity that communities in Cambodia do is problematic, but older people in such expatriate communities are still very concerned with such matters. Of course there are also other considerations involved here, such as linking local and overseas families together for a variety of political and economic reasons.
CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

In this final section we want to reflect on two aspects of the study that have important implications for future work. First, we will examine some of the implications for future HIV prevention efforts. Second, we want to discuss some of the strengths and limitations of using young people themselves as researchers.

Implications for HIV Prevention

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to offer a more realistic portrayal of young people's sexual beliefs and lives than has sometimes been the case. Our starting point in many ways were the somewhat partial appreciations offered by mainstream epidemiological analysis, and by the rapid ethnographies that seem intent on confirming beliefs that the social world is neatly divided into separate groups such as sex workers, clients, young people and so on; that these groups do not overlap one another; and that HIV prevention courts should be targeted accordingly. By way of contrast, we have argued that young people's beliefs and actions should not be seen as hermetically separate from those of sex workers and their clients (some young people may occasionally sell sex, and other young people may buy it) nor should they be seen as informed by apologies beliefs and expectation that are necessarily very different from those of older generation. What this study demonstrates is that it is in the interplay between new ideas and older ones that HIV-related risks are constituted, and in the interface between social respectable and socially illicit realms of practice, that they take their material forum. Without fully appreciating the ways in which young people work actively with factors as diverse as the intellectual resources offered them by formal ideologies of sex and sexual responsibility, by hanging economic circumstances and needs by Cambodian Literacy forms and the sentiments they express and by images and opportunities made available through the media and the arrival of and outside forces (whether those of the United Nations or of foreign governments and NGOs), we can not devise interventions for prevention that meet real as opposed to largely imaginary, needs.

But the analysis offered points to continuing pervasive effects linked to gender, residence, social background and ethnic, among other variables. The experiences of young
women were not the same as those of young men; and those of young people from rural areas were not identical to those of young people from the city. For, young men at least, sexual expectations differed depending on whether their partner is Cambodian or Vietnamese. It will be important to take these mediating influences into account when devising future interventions not by implying that all members of one social category or group are imbued with similar qualities or disadvantages -- but by differentiating our work so as to meet real but diverse needs.

Several key principles relating to the design and implementation of more effective programmes of HIV prevention derive from the preceding analysis. They include: (i) beginning with an analysis of the dominant discourses about sex and sexuality prevalent in a society or community, (ii) recognising these as discourses which may or may not have a direct relationship to present day sexual realities; (iii) moving beyond such recognition to enquire into contemporary sexual meanings, beliefs and behaviours in terms which are familiar to most people as they live their everyday lives, (iv) using enquiry methodologies that are sensitive to the difficulties respondents (particularly young women) may have in talking about beliefs and actions that are culturally taboo or socially sanctioned, (v) resisting the temptation to move too rapidly to the enumeration and quantification of sexual behaviours using non-indigenous categories such as those offered by modern day epidemiology and Western sexology,(vi) involving informants actively in the research process, perhaps as collectors and analysers of data as well as respondents; developing prevention messages and approaches that speak to sexual life as it lived (in all its complexity and contradiction) rather than sexual life as we might imagine or wish it to be; (vi) developing such work collaboratively with those whose sexual and reproductive health needs it is hoped to meet, not just with biomedical, social science and communication `experts' whose own understanding of local sexual realities may sometimes be limited and (vii) monitoring and evaluation such work using descriptions, categories and systems of meaning; that are familiar locally, no matter how worrying or 'offensive' they may seem to those whose own sexual socialization has been different.

Methodological concerns

In this, as in every study conducted within a qualitative and broadly interpretative framework, some special issues of methodological nature arise. There are familiar questions
relating to the reliability of data and the validity of interpretations made. And there are less familiar issues relating to the involvement of young people themselves as active members of the research team, rather than as simply the objects of study. We will briefly seek to address each of these considerations in turn.

The reliability and validity of the accounts offered

It was not possible to assess the reliability and validity of all the accounts elicited during interview. While the majority of these accounts were relatively non-contentious, matching descriptions encountered in focus group discussions or observations made during fieldwork, a few were somewhat more remarkable. Central among these were some of the accounts given by young men of their sexual attractiveness to women. Rather than ignoring these, or attempting to identify the young women concerned, they were critically evaluated (along with other less stereotypical descriptions) during regular meetings of the whole research team. In this way, efforts were made to assess their validity in reference to dominant cultural explanations and beliefs, as well as possible personal and procedural reactivity. This ‘sifting’ of accounts led to a small number being discarded.

More important, however, was the use of multiple research methods in the study as a whole. This permitted a degree of triangulation not possible had the investigation chosen to rely on either interviews or focus group discussions alone. One of the most powerful techniques for reliability and validity assessment involved the use of observational data to confirm the plausibility of the accounts, explanations and descriptions recurrent in interviews. We were also able to use interviews and focus group discussions to confirm or disconfirm interpretations of the practices and behaviours empirically observed during field worker.

The involvement of young people as researchers

Not unrelated to issues of reliability and validity was the involvement of young people in data collection and analysis. This relatively unusual procedure was adopted for several reasons, some of necessity, others from choice. We have already pointed out how the absence of suitably trained and qualified social researchers in Cambodia (partly a consequence of the closure of universities under Pol Pot and the relative slowness of educational restructuring since then),
together with our elicitation of ‘insider’ accounts of sexual life, encouraged us to train young people in their late teens and early twenties as interviewers and analysers of data. Our suspicion that peer interviewers might facilitate access to sexual and social domains hitherto untapped and uncharted by adult researchers; further encouraged the adoption of this research strategy. In making such decisions we recognised the potential for ‘over-rapport’ between researchers and researched, the possibility of exaggeration in the accounts elicited, and the danger of relatively inexperienced researchers lacking the skills whereby to maintain boundaries between their own lives and those of young people being interviewed.

In retrospect, however few of these anxieties proved founded. While upon occasion, there was evidence that the lack of in-depth understanding of social science research methodology impacted upon young researchers' diligence and application; this was more than made up for by their desire to gain access to and explore issues and contexts that could not easily have been imagined at the start of the study. For example, without the participation of these young researchers, we suspect it would have been quite impossible to explore the issues raised in interviews with sexually experienced young women. The 'shame' of talking about such matters with an adult would, we feel, have prevented many from describing so openly their experiences and fears. In our view, it is impossible to conceive of either of the two authors, older Cambodians or non-Cambodian researchers being able to describe sex in a recreational contexts involving young people in a way the young researchers were able to, let alone provide the detailed explanations, interpretations and justifications for risk-related sexual behaviour that many young people appear willing to engage in.

In the context of understanding more about risk-related sexual behaviour among young Cambodians, the study is probably the first in Cambodia to use relatively long-term ethnographic field study to illuminate aspects of young people's sexual lives. Given the limitations of the research, however, it cannot be claimed that this is an exhaustive investigation from which generalisations applicable to all young people aged 14-26 can be made. Further studies are needed of the social and cultural contexts of risk-related sexual behaviour among young Cambodians. These might best take the forum of community based investigations by young people, of themselves, and other young people. Such studies should also have an action research or action learning component, so as to encourage young people to think, always to minimise risk-related sexual behaviour among themselves:
While this paper has only touched upon some of the more important social and contextual factors affecting risk-related sexual behaviour among young people, not all those who described events, in some instances six years ago, knew that they were involved in risk-related sexual behaviour. Before 1993, Cambodians knew little about HIV/AIDS and since then some young people have become aware that unsafe sex may eventually kill them. In this study, some young people said that had they known at the time what they knew after discussing the issues with research team members, it would have been necessary to modify their behaviour. Whether they will do so in the fixture do this remains to be seen, since there are structural and cultural, as well as individual, obstacles to behaviour change (Sweat and Dennison, 1995). Intervening appropriately at several levels, and in a range of contexts, is essential if we are to respond appropriately to the challenge of the epidemic in Cambodia.
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