Any Port in A Storm: Coming to Terms with HIV in Lao PDR

CHRIS LYTTLETON

In Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), HIV/AIDS prevention programmes have largely focused on the dissemination of basic medicalised information. To date, these programmes have been spurred more by awareness of the increasing epidemics in countries surrounding Laos than epidemiological data from within its borders. As projects now begin to fine tune their approaches and concentrate on specific communities, a clearer understanding of sexual meaning and values is necessary. This paper considers the dynamics of sexual relationships established by men and women in nightclubs and drinkshops in Lao towns. Throughout Laos, social regulations foster an atmosphere wherein certain casual sexual interactions are built through negotiation. Moreover, these relations are established within a space marked by the avoidance of public scrutiny and personal responsibility. Despite uneven claims to influence, because neither identities nor outcomes are always fixed a discursive space is created for men and women that provides potential opportunity for notions of safe sex to be incorporated as an integral part of practice. Paradoxically, however, the very avoidance of public scrutiny that prompts this negotiation in the first place, denies an open legitimization of such practice.

‘The virus’ is described as lodged in a timeless and immobile place: grounded in an ‘isolated population’ until modernity stepped in to inscribe time and a mania for travel. People move and change, carrying with them the dangerous combination of their new sexual practices and their contaminated blood. (Patton 1996)

Introduction

Contemporary reports about Lao PDR, for popular consumption or conscripted by the recent wave of donor-driven development projects, typically begin with details that portray this country as small—both geographically and demographically. They then talk about its landlocked nature and the booming, looming economies of the countries that surround it. The introductory description is usually couched in one of two styles. On the one hand, we get the travelogue-type pieces that depict a backward and undeveloped country or, put more appealingly, a sleepy and still unaffected pocket of tranquillity—the ‘country that time forgot’, the ‘land of the mists and clouds’—with the implication that you better get there fast to enjoy this remaining spot of untouched riparian dream. In contrast, the second type typically points to the turmoil thrust onto an isolated and unready state unprepared for the rampant inroad of late 20th century capitalism. Grant

Chris Lyttleton is a lecturer in anthropology at Macquarie University, Sydney NSW 2109, Australia. He is the author of the forthcoming Endangered Relations: Negotiating Sex and AIDS in Thailand (Harwood Academic Press). e-mail: Chris.Lyttleton@mq.edu.au
Evans (Vientiane Times December 23, 1994) some while ago now, described a ‘moral panic’ coursing the streets of Vientiane in wake of the perceived leap into the modern world. More recently the tenor of concern for Laos in much popular discourse has shifted to uneven power relations shading its attempts to position itself within a larger trading order (Rigg 1997).

In fact, both these images are relevant to how we think about the potential and real spread of HIV in Laos. Firstly, Laos is extremely rugged and although improving, communication and movement in large areas of the country is not easy. This poses tremendous difficulties for national development planning. Indeed, literacy and health statistics place Laos low on any sort of global ranking. Relocation and the ‘rehabilitation’ of highland ethnic minority settlements further underscores the extent to which geography is seen as a key determinant of general economic development (Ireson and Ireson 1991: 933). Of particular significance to this paper is the common association of travel between provincial towns with the requirement to stay overnight for days at a time: the issue of importance is the potential men have in these circumstances to engage in multi-partner sex.

Secondly, external assistance, which remains the main source of financing for the government budget (World Bank 1996: 33), has markedly increased over the past few years and Laos is currently awash with projects that are bringing the hallmarks of increased capital development, in particular cash economy and urbanization. Since the government allowed freer access to local markets through economic reform, the first and still paramount symbol of opened borders (at least for those living in the capital of Vientiane) is the Friendship Bridge between Thailand and Lao PDR. The presence of this bridge is commonly taken by most Lao to represent the influx of all that is good and bad in the developed world.

Taken together, the picture of an unassuming country heading inexorably into a maelstrom of regional economic and social turmoil also colours international presentations of HIV epidemiology. In face of the lack of detailed national sero-surveillance figures, descriptions are left instead to merge metaphors of HIV transmission and Laos’ uneasy integration with the world outside its borders. War in the Blood: Sex Politics and AIDS in Southeast Asia (Beyrer 1998), for instance, devotes a chapter to offering a kind of world-around-us series of insights to see ‘just how vulnerable Laos is to HIV?’ In conclusion, the author remains undecided, at the mercy of the inevitable soft-focus that devils attempts to describe Laos: ‘it depends’ he says. ‘Laos is fragile, its economy is marginal, its society still in tatters after years of war. Change will inevitably come to the heart of Indochina, but in what form and in whose terms?’ (Beyrer 1998: 84) Like everyone else, we are left hanging. Beyrer’s prevarication is deliberate. Quite simply, information deemed sensitive is a scarce commodity. Given the dearth of research material on contemporary Laos, the country’s social fabric is often perceived as tabula rasa on which modernization is nowadays inscribing its runes (Rigg 1997: 159). It is easy to romanticize Laos in terms of this unknowing, to characterize it as an innocent whose secrets have yet to be unveiled; whose future is yet to be decided by the extent to which it is able to control forces outside its borders. It is easy to metaphorize Laos’ future in any of a number of arenas—economic, social, or more specifically health and AIDS—in terms that could go either way. Havoc or haven, it depends.
The most commonplace assumption, however, is that Laos must be eminently vulnerable to the spread of HIV given the raging epidemics on each of its borders: Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, China and Vietnam. As Porter (1997: 216) notes, AIDS in the golden triangle (Northern Burma, Thailand and Laos) can be aptly termed ‘the plague without borders’. Clearly the growth of sub-regional economic zones (such as the economic quadrangle that was supposed to replace the golden triangle as the prime spatial metaphor for the same region) and constant movement of ideas and people, sits awkwardly with the notion that HIV/AIDS can be controlled at the level of the nation/state (Linge 1997: 64).

Certainly, the message is not lost on most Lao that, coupled with increased exposure to foreign capital, ideas, fashions and goods, the increasing amount they are hearing about HIV and AIDS in Laos is directly related to contact with the world ‘out there’. Glaring testimony of this comes from one woman I spoke with in the northern province of Bokeo across the border from Chiang Rai, Thailand who said she (and her family) refused to eat fruit imported from Thailand for fear she might contract HIV.

But as HIV/AIDS education projects have slowly gathered steam since the mid 1990s and residents in many parts of Laos are nowadays hearing government officials and NGO workers begin to speak of the need for local attention to stopping HIV spread in Laos, few are clear about the reality and immediacy of the threat. Many Lao assume (and hope) that the historic and prevalent sense of isolation means HIV has in all likelihood not made great inroads into their country. This strategy of accentuating why one might be less vulnerable than one’s neighbours is perhaps a pan-human response to messages of threat. But the assumption also lies in part because of the (to date) limited detailed public campaigning, and in part because of the lack of systematic sero-surveillance data that can accurately project infection rates.

In what follows, I will examine aspects of sexual interaction in certain settings specific to Laos to explore further the social background relevant to HIV epidemiology. In nightclubs and drinkshops in Lao towns, social regulations foster an atmosphere wherein casual sexual interactions are primarily built through negotiation. Despite uneven claims to influence, because neither identities nor outcomes are always fixed, a discursive space is created for the men and women who engage in this negotiation. In these venues, social interactions and the accompanying apprehension of possible HIV threat are strongly informed by this sense of space: firstly, temporal space that is read via the assumption that AIDS is not an immediate (nor proximate) threat—it is not yet a problem in Laos, its dire prescription belongs somewhere else, like Thailand for example; secondly, geographic space that, on the one hand, offers opportunities for sexual interactions in specific sites (often when travelling) and, on the other hand, maps the bounds of ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ terrain—Laos is safe but Thailand is dangerous; and conceptual space wherein negotiation is both fostered and constrained. It is the final of these that I shall be concentrating on in this paper.

**Surveillance**

The first HIV positive case—a Lao returnee from Thailand was identified in 1989; and the first AIDS case diagnosed in Vientiane in 1991. Official figures
at the end of 1996 indicated that overall 157 sero-positive cases and 30 cases of AIDS had been detected from a total of 31,578 people tested since 1990. By 30 June 1998, the incidence had risen to 288 HIV infections and 91 cases of AIDS out of nearly 45,000 tested. As the World Health Organization reports in its regional surveillance summary: ‘the 1997 case reports from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic shows a 200% increase in the number of AIDS cases and a 52% increase in the number of HIV infections from the previous year. The number of AIDS cases is unusually high compared with the number of cases of HIV infection, confirming high levels of HIV under-reporting or underdiagnosis’ (WHO 1998). Informal and anecdotal reports, of course, put the level of HIV infection much higher than these official figures. There is some evidence of those who wish for anonymous testing, crossing the border into Thailand; the same is also apparently true for a few cases requesting medical assistance with HIV-related illness.

The reported data comes from somewhat ad hoc testing of certain designated groups, such as bar workers, blood donors, returnees, prisoners, hospital patients suspected of having AIDS and those requesting anonymous tests. These figures are generally recognized as unlikely to provide reliable estimates of levels of HIV infection for the country as a whole (WHO 1995a: 1). Unlike states that have been able to effectively establish HIV testing and data collection based on existing bureaucratic protocols for monitoring infectious disease, Laos has been hampered by a lack of material resources and the administrative infrastructure to carry out national sero-surveillance. There is no overarching system for HIV and STD reporting that includes all 11 provinces (WHO 1995b: 3). The headquarters of the National Committee for the Control of AIDS (NCCA) in Vientiane is the only location that carries out ELISA testing. Particle agglutination tests conducted in six other provinces are sent to Vientiane for confirmation. While testing facilities have expanded over the years, the NCCA has moved cautiously to set in place more thorough and widespread routines. One reason for proceeding slowly in developing a national surveillance system has been the knowledge that local health officials, who are already working against a daunting array of obstacles to improve the health status of their respective charges, have little capacity to fully offer services of confidentiality and counselling to accompany increased HIV testing.

Recently and partly in response to donor agencies who are increasing their funding of HIV prevention projects, the NCCA arranged for a sample of provinces to develop a more systematic and comprehensive epidemiological picture of HIV prevalence. Some provinces were not included in this sample due to either the lack of a fully functioning local AIDS committee or to hesitancy in becoming an active part of the national prevention program. The Lao health officials’ 1993 explanation that ‘a national sero-survey is difficult to organize’ because of geographic and demographic characteristics (Beyrer 1998: 71) still holds true, although one might add to this political constraints on mobilizing a combined national push at the different provincial levels.

The important point is that, unlike many countries that have mounted extensive HIV intervention campaigns only after an unwelcome wake-up call, national epidemiological figures have not been the overriding motivation driving the HIV/AIDS education being undertaken in Laos at present. Nor
have they provided any siren-like warning for individuals to strongly consider their own behaviour or generate a personalized sense of risk. Rather, it is the picture of HIV spread in neighbouring countries (coupled with donor agency inducement) that is fuelling the urgency that seems to be building in Laos. Documented levels of HIV from within the country pale in comparison to the hundreds of thousands affected in the countries on either side.

In a sense quite logically, therefore, public prevention programme commonly speak of the general need for awareness and caution but there has been little epidemiological emphasis that Lao people should accept this information as particularly locally relevant. By and large (and like anywhere else) most people see HIV as a problem of ‘the other’—most specifically someone not Laotian. This process of psychologically separating oneself from a perceived threat is helped by television shows, news and public service announcements about AIDS that are broadcast from Thailand (and in the absence of popular local programming, watched by many Laos). This psychic distancing is greatly aided by the presence of very real geographic borders never far from home—each province in Laos has a border with another country. Hence, HIV is locally considered by many, if not most Lao, as a serious Thai problem, (and increasingly Cambodian and Vietnamese) but far less an issue on their side of the border. One example typifies general perceptions, a woman who worked in a small drink shop told us: ‘condoms aren’t necessary here—Thailand is dangerous but there’s no AIDS in Laos. Lao men don’t like to use condoms, Thai men and other foreigners usually will.’

Although there appear to be signs that heroin is making inroads into Laos and needle use could escalate rapidly as it has done in parts of Burma, Thailand and Vietnam over the past two decades, injecting heroin is at present still virtually non-existent (Seger 1996). In what follows, therefore, I want to focus on one particular arena in which HIV could potentially be transmitted in Laos society—that of multi-partner sexual activity or as it is sometimes called by HIV project workers in Laos ‘negotiated sex’. In Laos, as in many other parts of the world, ‘commercial sex’ is an inadequate label for the many types of interactions that are loosely lumped together as casual and fleeting engagements. The term commercial sex denotes an acceptance of two parties to specific and implicit identities: that is a prostitute and her client/patron. In Laos, for reasons I shall explore, there is a tendency to avoid this mode of identification. Placing emphasis on negotiation also highlights an important aspect of the relationships that are established, in large part, for the consummation of the sex act—that is that the nature of the interaction is at once fashioned and contingent. As Jeffrey Weeks has noted:

In the first place, if sexuality has no intrinsic meaning, if it is neither good nor bad in itself, if, on the contrary, far from being a measure of meaning it embodies the imprint of a vast range of social meanings, like sedimented layers of rock, then the value systems built around it have to be understood as both historical and contingent. (1995: 48)

Sexuality, and therefore associated value systems are inevitably linked to relations of power and the shifting levels of resistance power produces. Furthermore and perhaps more broadly and with greater intensity than at any time previously, sexuality is now associated with danger as well as pleasure as HIV and AIDS discourses inform sexual constructions of risk.
Setting

Styles of relationships in two main venues, nightclubs and small drinkshops, offer insights into the lexicon of meanings on which casual sexual interactions depend. These are two distinct locales where sex might be negotiated. This is not to say that sexual behaviour is determined by the venue: there is no equivalent to the Thai brothel as we know it—that is, where men choose from a number of women and relations largely conform to a unitary script. Commercial or negotiated sex in Laos operates in a more fragmented frame of reference; it is more ambiguous in its presentation, less defined in its practice and always deliberately kept discreet.

Since the mid 1970s, when prostitution was officially and very firmly prohibited, opportunities for immediate casual sex have been limited (Ngaosyvathn 1993). Only recently have the nightclubs once again become a booming business in the main towns. While drinkshops with serving women did not disappear during this period, it was by no means an automatic assumption that young women who work as waitresses were available for sex. This is not to say that negotiated sex was nowhere to be found over the past two decades—it is to say that it took forms more transient and less formalized than those associated with specific locales. Very often commercial sex has been associated with travel and this still has strong resonance today, particularly with the opportunities men assume are appropriate to exploit when they are away from home. And likewise, it is associated with itinerant female traders, who set up food and drink stalls on riverbanks or at seasonal fairs throughout the country and who, on occasion, will sell sex. The term mae hang (divorced woman), when used to describe women traders who are separated from marital ties and impelled to move around the country selling small goods as their income, carries with it the specific implication of a woman who is available for sex.

We hear also of the barter that female traders have in the past been obliged to use to gain transport for themselves and their goods between different towns. These women would, on occasion, sleep with truck-drivers on route in lieu of other charges for passage. Sometimes regular relationships were established but the women had no particular bargaining power and were sometimes shared between different men. This pattern is from all reports far less common these days as the roads and public transport have improved markedly in the past several years.

While in some places the terms mae hang and saw tagiang noi (woman with a small lamp) are still enduring euphemisms for a prostitute of no fixed abode, more recently drinkshops and nightclubs have gained much greater profile in local consciousness as venues where one might expect to be able to negotiate a partner. What remains tangible, however, is the recognition that sexual relationships must be discreet and unadvertised. Such an atmosphere can, of course, be directly linked to the revolutionary government’s project of ridding society of what was considered a corrupt and immoral institution. Memories still linger of rehabilitation camps—one island in the midst of a lake is called Don Nang (meaning ‘woman’s island’) specifically because it housed the many women rounded up for inappropriate behaviour. These days the loosening of overarching state strictures on economic development
has prompted an increase in the number of women working in drinkshops and nightclubs and the number of men feeling both financially and socially able to exploit such interactions. But while large-scale roundups have been less frequent, fear of public reprobation still very much colours the nature and tenor of relationships established in these venues. In turn, the manner in which public scrutiny is considered anathema to enacting these connections, so too concepts born of public health interventions are denied any regular association with these behaviours, precisely owing to their suppressed nature. Hence, going beyond any simplistic estimation of whether or not condoms are used, we can usefully consider aspects of the relationships that take place in these venues for what they tell us about consideration of HIV.

Nightclubs and drinkshops differ markedly in size and atmosphere. The nightclubs are loud and festive and cater to specific sub-sets of the urban population. Some are haunts of the members of a burgeoning youth culture who dance en masse to a mixture of the latest music from Bangkok and more traditional Lao pop songs. It is frequently suggested that young men and women are becoming more sexually active particularly in the cities. One middle-aged trader I spoke with succinctly summarized: ‘these days young men get it for free, us older guys have to pay for it.’ The clubs that cater to the young, therefore, have few hostesses.

Typically, older men, frequently those visiting from other provinces or other countries, patronize the majority of nightclubs. These clubs have many hostesses—between 50 and 100 in popular Vientiane venues. Here, the men drink and dance (forn) with the club hostesses; they also ten slo when the band’s tempo drops and this is the dance of choice for many patrons as they get to embrace their partner closely. Some indicated that they can judge the potential for a sexual relationship based on how intimately the hostess is willing to allow the two bodies to touch during these dances.

Nightclubs close at 11.30pm. This is a strict state-enforced curfew. If the man has persuaded the woman to join him further, they will go together if he has a car; or she might follow in a tuk-tuk (small public taxi) to avoid detection of leaving together. Some clubs are attached to hotels and although illegal, she can discretely follow the man to his room for a short period. Public apartment buildings require that the watchman is paid first. Private dwellings are the most discrete but are less often available as the men very often have families. Despite the more public threat of arrest in the hotel room, some women said they prefer this since they do not get paid up-front and if they are in the same hotel as the nightclub then they can call the management for assistance should the man turn rough or refuse to pay. Elsewhere fear of discovery puts them in a very tenuous bargaining position, as they dare not arouse official attention.

Importantly, not all women will entertain men outside of the confines of the dancehall. They make a monthly salary as hostesses or sawdrink and some resist attempts of men to develop the relationship further. In provincial capitals, this is restricted further in some places where the hostesses must sleep on the premises and are prohibited from leaving after the club closes. Upon arrival, therefore, men do not necessarily assume they will be able to find a woman with whom to have sex, although with some familiarity at the particular club they can usually connect with women who are available.
The atmosphere at small drinkshops is very different. Certain dynamics of the encounters in these small bars help us consider how manoeuvres to lessen the transmission of HIV enter the equation. It is impossible to consider contemporary sexuality without taking into account the regulatory frameworks that shape interactions and nowadays discourses born of the AIDS epidemic are increasingly dominant chords. In Laos, concepts of HIV and AIDS are only slowly beginning to become constant accompaniments of sexual practice, to become a part of the sedimented meanings I referred to earlier. However, in the context of increasing promotion of cautionary messages circulating in lowland Lao society, much of it inspired by Thai campaign strategies, increased awareness of HIV is inevitable. The task, in an applied sense, becomes to better appreciate how the blanket and very blunt mandates that seek to regulate 'safe sex' fit, on the one hand, with how local multi-partner relationships are established and on the other, with the sometimes strident moves of the state to control these relationships.

In these small bars (*han noi, han gin du'm*), the sexual experience is built on a set of expectations and formative manoeuvres that while sharing many of the same structuring elements as those occurring in the nightclubs, are brought into much clearer focus. Moreover, the small clubs are important staging grounds for actors to practice strategies that they hope to employ, at some later stage, in the nightclubs.

**Practice**

Men, usually in small groups, go, obviously enough, to drink beer. In most places there are only two or three small low tables with chairs and small couches around them. Drinkshops are always small and low-key with between two and four women who join the men as they drink. Very often you find only one or two tables separated by curtains at any particular spot. As they are becoming more publicized, trails of small fairy-lights outside note their presence, but there are also many that look just like storefronts and they maintain an almost clandestine presence discouraging entry to unknown visitors.

Throughout Laos, it is commonplace that men can expect to have female companionship as they drink or eat. Typically this might be at a roadside stall or any number of small restaurants. The man can reasonably request that the waitress/attendant join him. The (usually young) woman breaks no social bounds by drinking with him, it is simply a social extension of the particular services of selling food or drink.

In the drinkshops, there are further expectations that build on this tradition. Here the price of beer is much higher and the quantity consumed usually much greater. In contrast to the nightclubs, the women do not receive salaries outside of the small commission they get for the beer consumed. Their primary goal, therefore, is to encourage the guests to drink rapidly and copiously. The young women themselves also drink, often more quickly than the men (or alternatively surreptitiously empty their glasses onto the floor). The general result is that both men and not uncommonly the women as well become very drunk.
These drinking sessions are not always long. If another group arrives when the bar is full, they will sometimes be told to come back as it is typical that as the price escalates quickly the men do not stay indefinitely. As the drinking proceeds, it is customary that the male may embrace (and handle) the young woman next to him. The beer sold is colloquially termed bia jup, bia gort—kissing beer, hugging beer. In other words, the cost of the beer includes rights to the young woman’s body. As the number of beers consumed increases, these rights are extended and the embraces become more forward. At the same time, rapid beer consumption is both the goal and the means.

These are hardly earth-shattering findings: men and women everywhere employ such strategies to effect physical intimacy. But they do signal a commercial sexual experience that is markedly different from that found in neighbouring Thailand (or Cambodia and Vietnam) where, in brothels or massage parlours, a woman is chosen for a specific and immediate activity, that is, sexual union. In these small bars in the larger Lao towns, sexual consummation is not necessarily part of the picture. For both social and economic reasons, the sexual experience framed in drinkshops is built around expectations of physical contact, hugging, fondling and kissing but not necessarily immediate consummation—and, in effect to this extent, one might say 'safe sex' is being unintentionally fostered.

Such practices find consonance with a system of social prohibition that, as I have argued for the Northeast Thai (Isan), works to commodify the female body (Lyttleton 1999). In lowland Lao society (which culturally includes Northeast Thailand) transgressions on the female body have historically carried with them a series of fines depending on the severity of the transgression. In a parallel fashion, the more beer one pays for in the drink shops, the more access one has to the waitresses body; this is expected and generally followed as a pattern of interaction. In times of increased visibility of the cash economy, the relatively high (but negotiable) fee for sex—the most common figure varies between $20 and $40, almost the equivalent of a government monthly salary—is explained in terms that relate back to the system of sanctions on sexual transgressions. For example, a woman who worked in a guest house where men brought women they had met in bars described that women are expensive to sleep with because of the cost of impropriety and loss of social standing the woman must bear. Just as I heard often in Isan, the words kha sia hai (cost of damage) defined the fee and summarized the recompense of social and physical loss.

There are many reasons why the physical contact in the bars does not automatically lead to a completed sexual union. They are important in so far as they speak to the nature of the relationships that do take form and as clinical as it sounds, they are important for understanding the most judicious employment of ‘safe sex’ interventions. Logistics, economics and jural repercussions all play their part. After a dozen or more cans of beer the additional cost of sex is for some men prohibitive. For others, if available, a room out the back serves for the couple to have sex. In this case, the guest pays a small fee as room-charge over and above that agreed to for the woman’s body. More generally though, if sex is to happen the couple will leave for other premises. If the owners do not allow the waitress to go before closing time, she might arrange to meet him the next day. Either way, transport is
required and more importantly somewhere to go. As mentioned, many hotels will not allow women to accompany the guests into the rooms and there is the constant fear of arrest. Thus, it depends on whether the man can arrange a room somewhere—examples I heard included rooms in a friend’s house, commercial offices (after-hours) and so on. In some instances, I was told that men must visit the bar several times before suitable trust has been established to allow sex to occur. Sometimes women working in these bars establish serial relations with one man at a time approximating more closely the image of minor wife or mia noi that is found in Thailand.

Commonly, therefore, in popular conceptions the sexual encounter associated with the bars is the opportunity to touch the woman. I remember on my first visit to Laos in 1994, certain of these venues were described to me in glowing fashion by young men as places where one 'could touch a woman anywhere’. No mention was made of intercourse as part of this sexual experience. Nevertheless, despite constraints, sexual relations do occur. What I wish to highlight is that the occasions on which men do sleep with women in this context are not grounded in a formulaic construction so often preferred by public health strategists. While sexual interactions usually involve some sense of a ‘terms of agreement’ before they take place—where and when to meet etc., there is equally a constant slippage away from open acknowledgement and greater definition of these relationships at all levels of produced discourse.

**Staging Identity**

So what then do the dynamics tell us about respective inclinations to safer sex practices in either the bars or the nightclubs? I will single out two issues and firstly, consider the women who work as waitresses. Young women who seek employment at the drinkshops are not always aware that sleeping with guests is customary and from some points of view inevitable. They have often been told they will simply serve and drink with the guests. I heard of women leaving factory work temporarily to see if money is made more easily as a waitress, or from rural villages arriving through networks of friends or relatives (very often the owners have extensive networks they draw on to recruit young rural women). Regardless of the reality of the situation in the drinkshops, general perceptions are maintained that sex is neither customary nor obligatory.

At the same time, young women who are attracted by the glamour and status associated with the fancy more up-market nightclubs see these small bars as vital stepping stones. Employment in the nightclubs demands preparation. The position requires a wardrobe and sophistication that young women fresh from the rural sector have neither the money nor the experience to fashion. They work in the small bars to gain the necessary trappings, both material and experiential to move to the larger clubs which are soaked with the appeal of meeting men who have higher status and more money. While the number of staff is by no means small, there are many more applicants at nightclubs than there are jobs. The more fashionable clubs in Vientiane have tremendously long waiting lists for women wishing to work as hostesses. This, in itself,
places pressure on the employed women to maintain subservience to the
management. I was told that hostesses felt unable to seek support and advice
from the older women who work as managers concerning treatment for STDs
as they were afraid of instant dismissal.

The small drinkshops are, in simple terms, preparatory schools. They
throw together inexperienced (often rural) young women with those who
have worked long enough to know the ropes and sometimes older women
who choose to no longer compete for attention at the nightclubs. Often they
share the same room and soon the lifestyle. The young woman learns how to
sit close to a man and provide a service—that of social and physical
exchange. As I mentioned, this fits with already embedded notions of social
relationships whereby it is expected that a man desire female companionship
as he drinks and he pays for physical touch as he goes. Secondly, she learns
to drink large quantities of alcohol, which signals a pronounced difference
from similar environments in Thailand and other neighbouring countries
where the waitress/hostess more typically drinks Coke or lemonade/soda. In
the process, often while inebriated, the young woman learns, what she
perhaps did not know, about sleeping with men.

In the course of this familiarization, it is constantly reinforced that the
woman has ‘chosen’ a role that society despises. She knows this from the
constant fear of arrest in which case it is she, not the man, that will require
re-education. She knows this from the way she is derided in common
conversation (phu ying bo di). She knows this from the times she has
nowhere to turn for help when she gets an STD—mamasans are too nervous
to take the young women to hospitals, there are no specialist clinics and the
young women do not dare go alone as stories of prejudice from medical offi-
cials are commonplace in these circles. There is a widespread sense in
which young women in these bars internalize a sense of being categorically
on the downside of karmic balance which strongly hampers their ability to
defend their self-worth. Programmes encouraging personal health concerns
in this context must confront this fatalistic attitude as one of the most
serious obstacles, second only to men’s resistance to condoms.

Turning to their clients, the men at either bars or nightclubs do not
always wear condoms if they sleep with the women. While this is a statement
heard for many years in HIV/AIDS programmes, let me concentrate on one
aspect that is specific to a particular combination of factors in Laos. Casual
and/or commercial sex happens in a range of diverse contexts—it is not
always planned or expected. There are few specific venues that the man can
always take for granted that sex will be available. He may arrive at a small bar
for instance and the few women who work there are engaged with other
men. Most importantly, there is always some apprehension over legal or
social discovery. Hence, the ambiguity and relative secrecy of many of these
relationships that are established hinders the active association between
specific practices and HIV infection.

I noted earlier that commercial sex is frequently associated in the local
imaginary with travel from one province to another. Extra-marital sex in these
situations is frequently depicted as happening ‘by chance’. Significantly, men
actively maintain this image. Lao men all know that in various situations sexual
partners can be found no matter where in the country one might be. But both
men and women depict the unassumed nature of these potential liaisons—you never quite know when you might encounter them. In this reading of events and their outcomes, men refuse to take responsibility for their actions by constantly referring to their lack of concrete intention to find a partner. Often I would hear descriptions such as:

I couldn’t help myself,—it was an ‘emergency’ [stuksaen, meaning emergency is a euphemism for a chance encounter that has led to sex]; when I’m away from home, I meet a ‘mae hang’—it’s an ‘emergency’; suddenly confronted with a beautiful woman, I had ‘no control.

The term gai long (literally ‘lost chicken’) is used to specifically refer to a woman who one does not plan to sleep with. For example, in one conversation, a man said: ‘I can’t restrain myself, a gai long comes along and I can’t stop myself. If I’m drunk and a pretty woman comes, I won’t use a condom, that would be a waste.’ Mirroring patterns in other Asian countries where women commonly depict sexuality using male standards, Lao women repeat the same explanations, ‘sometimes our husbands don’t always intend to sleep with other women. They just end up in situations.’

Because sex is not always a foregone conclusion, the notion is cultivated that somehow it is out of the man’s hands as if by chance a young woman will sleep with him. The onus of the occasion implies one must make the most of the moment, forget any thought of the implications. This constructed narrative for sexual experience greatly denies forethought that would, as HIV discourses enter the sexual realm, of necessity implicate precautionary practice. The denial of personal responsibility is abetted by a social system that, on the one hand, makes women’s intimacy available in restaurants and bars and on the other, maintains a veil over such activities through active suppression. Moreover, in so doing, the motivation to use condoms is greatly lessened despite the increasing awareness of HIV as a personal threat.

Conclusions

This paper has offered a description of general attitudes internalized from widespread understandings that underpin the presence of negotiated sex in Laos. These are inevitably shaped by various forces attempting to control sexual practice. Legal restrictions and fear of public disclosure fosters a context wherein relationships are established through negotiation at bars and nightclubs. Unequal power relations between men and women notwithstanding, because neither identities nor outcomes are always fixed, a discursive space is created that provides potential opportunity for notions of safe sex to be incorporated as an integral part of practice emerging from these settings. Paradoxically, however, the very avoidance of public scrutiny that affords this negotiation between the two parties in the first place, denies open legitimization of safer sex practice. When the practices remain surreptitious, supporting particular versions of these practices, that is relationships that are conducted with safety and dignity, becomes impossible.

As fear of AIDS becomes more widespread, occasional moves in official circles have attempted their own brand of instigating caution, in this case, through more active prohibition. Over the past five years, controlling
manoeuvres had seemingly become less pressing. In 1993, a Lao newspaper reported that 267 women in Vientiane had been ‘counselling’ for engaging in prostitution (Savage 1994: 44). Since then dictates apparently softened somewhat and appeared aimed at image rather than eradication. For example, in Vientiane, karaoke was subsequently banned; in one southern town slo dancing has been prohibited in the nightclubs. New codes insisted that all women in the small bars (at least in Vientiane) dress demurely, that is, wear a pha sin and restricted staff numbers to less than five waitresses per bar.

Early in 1996, a conference on the trafficking of young women was held co-temporaneously in various Asian cities. Vientiane was one of the host capitals. Delegates discussed the increasing numbers of young women drawn into prostitution. Not coincidentally and perhaps in parallel with similar moves in neighbouring countries to control perceived escalation in corruption and loose morality, ensuing weeks saw renewed attempts to lower the profile of the availability of women for sex. Waitresses were rounded up (gewart lang) from small drinkshops in Vientiane. Guest houses and hotels known to be loose with regulations were raided in the middle of the night. It was assumed all relationships were suspect and discovered couples were arrested. Each woman from the drink shops was summarily tested for HIV and fined. Great uncertainty followed as to how long the women were to be detained if they were unable to pay and whether they would be transported to previous holding camps. The bars were not allowed to re-open until they obtained a license to sell food as well as beer. Despite the anxiety provoked for owners, staff and patrons alike, the common perception is that such actions are aimed not at removing prostitution but gaining some control on the public demonstration of liberty to pursue such connections; to lessen the moral panic in other words.

However, these moves reinforce the fear and distrust of approaching sexuality (outside of a marital relationship) publicly and this has very real implications for HIV infection and programmes aimed at lessening its spread. The clampdown created the unhappy association for women in the nightclubs and drinkshops between incipient prevention projects organised by the health authorities and the fear and paranoia provoked by mandatory testing carried out by the same authorities. At the same time, it must be recognised that foreign donors should carry at least part of the responsibility for such scenarios. Money for HIV projects has spurred both the current surveillance techniques and is encouraging more specific attempts to map the social and geographic spaces that ‘commercial’ sex inhabits in Laos. Wisely the local health authorities are thinking carefully about the implications of documentation for women that are drawn to inhabit such spaces.

Thus, we can never separate the individual strategies men and women employ in their daily interactions from the substrate of regulation and resistance and the value systems that support or hinder choices. Again I return to Weeks (1995: 13) who writes: ‘If AIDS is the challenge, the hope of the new lies in the everyday experiments in sexual life which are transforming personal life.’ Although framed by increasing surveillance, a key facet of the relationships I have been describing is the acknowledged room for negotiation between individuals. Nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than in the preferred choice of a poster message for a 1996 HIV campaign in the drinkshops and nightclubs.
At a pre-testing, women working in bars and clubs decided that the wording 'we can have pleasure, safe pleasure—if we understand each other' conveyed the appropriate tone and urgency. 'If we understand each other': a phrase that immediately strips bare the terms of negotiation—any other conditions are superfluous. And it suggests that in the realm of mutual responsibility for safer sex, despite uneven authority to speak, individual voices have space to bargain. What they lack is the opportunity for public audience that might foster acceptance of these terms. In Laos, this is the arena that prevention efforts must support: to ensure a say in how 'it depends'.

Acknowledgements

The material in this paper stems from several periods of fieldwork in the mid 1990s when I assisted with the development of HIV/AIDS IEC projects in Lao PDR. I am enormously grateful to my Lao colleagues for their friendship and assistance. Any errors are, of course, my own.

Notes


2. The data I reported in this article was collected during visits to Lao PDR in 1995 and 1996 for periods of three and six months respectively. During this time, I assisted with multi-sectoral development of IEC materials targeting specific communities in Vientiane and two other Lao towns close to the Thai border: Huay Sai and Pakse. Preliminary research included focus-group discussions in these towns with groups such as traders, boat operators, truck drivers, hostesses and so forth, to inquire into the background of local understandings and practices geared towards HIV and its prevention. The programme then involved investigations into how best to tailor messages to suit different audiences in the three sites. This was largely conducted via focus-group and outreach activities. Due to the sensitive nature of the discussions involving sexuality in Laos, information gathered from focus groups was augmented by casual and informal conversations with a wide range of men and women (in primarily urban settings). My chief discussion in this paper stems from peripheral observations of the dynamics within bars and nightclubs made during the course of this work in Laos. It is not based on quantitative data collection, but rather draws on data derived from a broad ethnographic inquiry into social interactions in general and sexual practice in specific. Material has been selected in order to provide a finer-grained picture of the assumptions underlying casual relationships established in the specific settings that form the basis of this study.

3. The repeated drinking required of the women, day in and day out, raises the very real spectre, in my mind, of incipient alcoholism.

References


PORTER IN A STORM: COMING TO TERMS WITH HIV IN LAO PDR


Résumé

Dans la République démocratique populaire du Laos, les programmes de prévention du VIH/sida se sont principalement focalisés sur la diffusion d’information médicales de base. Jusqu’à présent, ces programmes se sont plus efforcés de faire prendre conscience du développement de l’épidémie dans les pays voisins, que d’informer sur les données épidémiologiques au Laos. Maintenant que les programmes tendent à mieux ajuster leur stratégie et à mieux cibler les communautés spécifiques, une meilleure compréhension du sens et des valeurs se rattachant à la sexualité est nécessaire. Cet article examine la dynamique des relations sexuelles établie par les hommes et les femmes fréquentant les boîtes de nuit et les café dans les villes laottiennes. Dans l’ensemble du Laos, les normes sociales créent un climat dans lequel sont négociées des interactions sexuelles occasionnelles. Ces relations s’inscrivent dans un espace marqué par le souci d’éviter le regard public et la responsabilité personnelles. Un espace de dialogue est aussi créé pour les hommes et pour les femmes, qui offre une opportunité pour que les notions de sexe sans risque soient incorporées comme un élément constitutif des comportements. Mais paradoxalement, le souci très marque d’éviter le regard public, qui détermine très largement la négociation, ne permet pas une légitimisation ouverte des ces pratiques.

Resumen

Los programas para la prevención del VIH y el SIDA en la RDP de Laos han tenido sobre todo como tema central la divulgación de básica información médica. Hasta la fecha, el motivo de estos programas ha sido el aumento de las epidemias en países vecinos más que los datos epidemiológicos dentro de
sus fronteras. Ahora que se empieza a dar un enfoque más preciso a los proyectos, concentrándose en comunidades determinadas, es necesario que se entiendan mejor el sentido y los valores de la sexualidad. Este artículo estudia la dinámica de las relaciones sexuales que ocurren entre hombres y mujeres en clubs nocturnos y bares en las ciudades de Laos. Las normas sociales en todo el país favorecen que las interacciones sexuales ocasionales sean negociadas. Además, estas relaciones se establecen dentro de un espacio preocupado por evitar el escrutinio público y la responsabilidad personal. A pesar de que hay opiniones muy diversas sobre el grado de influencia, debido a que no existen ni identidades ni resultados fijos, se ha creado un espacio discursivo para hombres y mujeres en el que se proporciona la oportunidad potencial de incorporar nociones de relaciones sexuales seguras como parte integral en sus costumbres. No obstante, resulta paradójico que evitando el escrutinio público, que es el motivo último de esta negociación, no se legitimicen abiertamente tales prácticas.