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Recent Changes in Sexual Attitudes, Norms, and Behaviors among Unmarried Thai Men: A Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In-depth interviews are used to explore recent changes in the normative context of male heterosexual relations in Thailand. Changes in ideas about the appropriateness and availability of both commercial and noncommercial relationships are examined, as well as changes in ideas regarding the importance of condom use during various types of sexual encounters. Due in large part to fears about AIDS, many younger Thai men have rebuffed older peers’ efforts to initiate them into traditional patterns of sexual life. This resistance, along with several other concurrent social changes underway, is causing the long standing modal pattern of sexual initiation with sex workers to give way to more varied formative expressions of male sexuality. Implications of these changes are discussed with respect to both social policy and further research.

Key words: Thailand, males, peer influence, sex, AIDS, condoms, qualitative.
INTRODUCTION

Profound changes are underway in Thai patterns of sexual relations. After having suffered the impact of a rapidly expanding AIDS epidemic for almost a decade, the country has in the past few years seen remarkable declines in the rates of spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Changes in the progression of HIV have been documented by a series of studies that have been measuring infection levels among several population subgroups, especially military recruits. That concurrent behavioral change is also occurring is widely assumed, but there have been fewer systematic efforts to assess how behavioral change is affecting the rate of spread of the AIDS virus\(^1\) and vice-versa. It is also widely assumed that the normative and attitudinal structure underlying patterns of sexual behavior are also changing dramatically, but there is very little research of any kind on the extent or nature of any changes in attitudes and norms.

Studies of behavioral change, especially sexual behavior, present a set of methodological challenges not faced by studies of seroincidence and prevalence. Sexual histories are sometimes sensitive; and as norms about appropriate behavior change, tendencies for answering in a socially desirable manner can bias the reported behavioral results. Studies of the norms and attitudes themselves are beset by similar challenges, and face the additional obstacles of being not directly observable, subtle (not salient), and fairly complex, especially during times of change. All of this makes the exploration of normative and attitudinal change in the area of sexual behavior extremely difficult using conventional survey techniques.

Qualitative methods provide an ideal venue for exploring the changing social context in which early Thai male sexual behavior occurs. The open-ended format of this approach allows for extensive rapport building during the interview, provides an opportunity for the interviewer and informants to explore complex, ambiguous, and potentially sensitive material, and provides an opportunity to explore unanticipated topics as they arise in the interview. The primary goal of the current paper is to employ in depth qualitative interviews to help shed light on the normative and attitudinal shift underlying these recent epidemiological and behavioral changes. A secondary goal is to highlight topics that should be included in a longitudinal nationally representative survey of Thai sexual behavior.\(^2\)

The paper begins with a description of the social and cultural contexts of male sexual behavior. Statistical evidence suggesting recent changes in these normative patterns of behavior is briefly reviewed. Next, the data collection strategy and data analysis methodology are outlined. Principal themes regarding change elicited from the interviews are presented in the results section, and the implications of these results are discussed in the conclusions.

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\(^1\) Hanenberg and Rojanapithayakorn. 1998; and Chamratrithirong et al. (no date) are notable exceptions.

\(^2\) Although the current paper focuses on male heterosexual behavior, some Thai men engage in sex with men as well as with women (Beyrer et al. 1995; London et al. 1997). This aspect of male sexual life should also be included in a national study of sexual relations.
BACKGROUND

The Historical and Cultural Context

Commercial sex patronage has been normative for unmarried Thai men for at least as long as systematic information has been collected on the topic, and presumably for much longer. Systematic surveys beginning in the early 1990s indicate widespread commercial sex patronage among young men before marriage, a peer group context for these behaviors, and associated heavy alcohol consumption (Sittitrai et al. 1991; Nopkesorn et al. 1993; VanLandingham et al. 1995b). Given the high prevalence of STDs during the two decades prior to these surveys (Bamber et al. 1993), these patterns were surely widespread long before these surveys were conducted (e.g., see Fox 1960).

Indeed, historical sources indicate that the roots of commercial sex in Thailand go back at least to the Ayutthaya period; writers during this era make reference not only to STDs but also to commercial sex directly (La Loubère 1986; Bamber et al. 1993). Commercial sex patronage apparently expanded in Phuket, an island in southern Thailand, during the 19th century as the coal industry developed there (Boonchalaksi and Guest 1994). Mettarikannond (1983) writes that commercial sex was taxed by the government in a number of provinces during the reign of King Rama V (late 19th century), suggesting a vibrant industry.

These anecdotal accounts notwithstanding, because of the lack of reliable data it is very difficult to make confident generalizations about patterns of sexual behavior occurring before the advent of modern social science surveys. But it seems virtually certain that commercial sex was readily available in most urban areas for men who had the discretionary income to pay for it. Still, this population of males with discretionary cash was likely to be small. It would not be until the widespread modernization of the Thai economy during the 1960s that large numbers of Thai men would have the discretionary funds required to visit commercial sex workers on a regular basis. Declining fertility and the increasing importance of income generation for women (Muecke 1984), the influx of money and foreigners associated with the war in Vietnam, and the expansion of international tourism (Truong 1990) all may have provided further impetus to the spread of commercial sex in Thailand.

As is the case for sexual behavior, it is not possible to make confident generalizations regarding predominant sexual norms and attitudes for the period prior to the early 1990s since there are no systematic and population based surveys conducted on this topic. Frequent references to sexual relations outside of marriage (both commercial and noncommercial forms) throughout Thai literature (e.g., see Phillips 1987) belie the claims of those who would argue that Thai sexual morality has been fundamentally corrupted by outside influences (e.g, Phongpaichit 1982); sexual license for Thai men is long standing and well established. Even so, it is critical to distinguish among the levels of acceptance for different forms of sexual expression. While mistress relationships for married men of substance and commercial sex participation for other men may be considered by most to be quite ordinary behavior, Klausner’s (1987) observation that (noncommercial) premarital sexual relations between unmarried men and women were generally frowned upon in the rural areas he worked in during the 1960s is likely generalizable to other rural areas of the country at that time as well. More recently, Knodel et al. (1996) find that
love affairs involving married individuals can be quite disruptive to both the marriage and the community at large; this was almost certainly the case in earlier eras as well.

How pervasive these early norms about appropriate sexual behavior were is unknown. But by the early 1990s modern survey methods had documented marked variation in attitudes, norms, and behaviors regarding commercial sexual behavior, e.g., between the most privileged groups and everyone else. University campuses were targeted for safe sex campaigns early during the AIDS epidemic, and these campaigns appear to have met with success. Just a few years prior to these interventions, upper classmen taking lower classmen to a brothel was a common component of initiation into college life, but this practice was already in decline by 1991. In fact, these same survey data indicate that very few undergraduates in an upcountry university were going to commercial sex establishments at all (VanLandingham et al. 1993).

But norms during the early 1990s remained quite supportive of commercial sex visitation by other groups of men. Knodel et al. (1996) find generally tolerant attitudes among Thais regarding commercial sex visitation by unmarried men; Brown and Sittitrai (1995) note that men in many of the Asian societies affected by AIDS engage in commercial sexual relations without sanction. In fact, VanLandingham (1993) finds substantial proportions (66 – 88%) of young male students, soldiers, clerks, and laborers reporting that they would be expected to visit a commercial sex establishments if their friends were going. This importance of peers is consistent with the recent Family and Youth Survey (Xenos 1995) which reports substantial proportions of young men depending upon each other for advice on sex and romantic issues generally. Other recent survey and qualitative work also implicates peer influence, alcohol consumption, and social expectations as central elements in the maintenance of these patterns of male sexual initiation (Im-em 1999; Maticka-Tyndale, et al. 1997; VanLandingham 1997; Fordham 1995).

Until quite recently, commercial sex among Thai men seems to have been generally tolerated, if grudgingly, by Thai women. Commercial sex for unmarried men has been viewed to be an unremarkable and natural activity in a man’s maturation process; occasional commercial sex patronage among married men, while more problematic, has been generally tolerated by many married Thai women as well (VanLandingham et al. 1998; VanLandingham and Grandjean 1997; MacQueen et al. 1996; Knodel et al. 1996). This tolerance is rooted in a cultural system that is quite sympathetic towards male sexual desire. While it is true that sexual preoccupation and unrestrained sexual behavior is flawed from a Buddhist perspective, Buddhism also posits male sexuality as inherently problematic. In other words, it is understood from a Thai Buddhist point of view that sexual desire is a singularly difficult obstacle for men to overcome (Keyes 1986). Even if male philandering has, in at least a philosophical sense, been viewed as a sin and as contrary to Buddhist principles, it has also been generally understood, accepted, and tolerated by women as an inherent and fundamental male weakness -- until recently.

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3 Female sexuality has traditionally been seen as much less problematic from a religious standpoint. The most difficult worldly attachment for women to give up (cf. sex for men) is attachment to children (Keyes 1984).
Recent Epidemiological and Behavioral Changes

These longstanding and widespread permissive sexual norms for men are becoming problematic due to both modernization and epidemiological forces. Increasing awareness of less divergent norms of sexuality between men and women (i.e., normative systems with a less pronounced “double standard”) in the west, and less supervision in the cities where many young Thais have migrated for work (Thaweesit 2000; Ford and Saiprasert 1993), are probably influencing more Thai women to engage in sexual experimentation before marriage than in any other era (Isarabhakdi and Cornwell 1995). Similarly, ideas regarding companionate marriage may be becoming more prevalent within some elite groups. If true, this could lead to some women becoming increasingly assertive for their sexual needs and desires.

But if modernization forces are having a liberating influence on some aspects of female sexuality, epidemiological forces are having a conservative influence on others. The spread of HIV and AIDS is increasing fears among women about the possibilities of infection (Thaweesit 2000), with good reason: sex with one’s husband is now the main route of contracting HIV for most married Thai women (Brown and Sittitrail 1995).

Men are reacting to these cultural and epidemiological changes as well. If more women are becoming willing to engage in sexual relations before marriage, there may be increasing opportunities for men to have noncommercial premarital sex partners compared with earlier eras. Moreover, fears about the risks of infection with commercial sex workers may be an incentive for men to seek out noncommercial sexual partners, and/or to engage in other strategies perceived to be less likely to lead to infection.

Recent behavioral and epidemiological evidence suggests that many men have in fact done so. Thongthai and Guest (1995) find in their 1993 sample of the general young adult population that the proportion of men reporting their first sex with a commercial sex worker (about a third) to be much less than the levels found in the earlier studies of military recruits reported above; 43% of the men in fact indicated that they felt that a commercial sex interaction involving an unmarried man was wrong or a mistake (pen gan kratham pit). While self reports of sexual behavior may suffer from bias in the current atmosphere, HIV prevalence rates among incoming male military recruits have also fallen throughout the country, and have plummeted in the north (Mason et al. 1995). STD rates throughout the country have also fallen (Hanenberg et al. 1994). While no data source indicating STD decline is without problems (e.g., there may be increasing tendencies for STD patients to be treated outside of the official system; men may delay sexual initiation until after military induction), taken together, a conclusion of phenomenal behavioral change seems inescapable. This change occurs in the context of a massive public education campaign about the dangers of unprotected sex with commercial sex workers, and a national campaign to enforce a 100% condom policy among brothel owners (Phoolcharoen et al. 1998). Evaluation of the condom promotion campaign indicates much increase in condom usage (Chamratrithirong 1999), but there has as yet been little attempt to evaluate concurrent changes

4 Due perhaps in part to migration to cities where they are exposed to new ideas about relationships (Isarabhakdi and Cornwell 1995) and to remarkable increases in levels of girls education over the past few decades (Knodel 1997).
DATA AND METHODS

To explore the normative structure of a variety of male social networks, unmarried men from a variety of social backgrounds and who had extensive social networks with other unmarried men were recruited and interviewed during December 1996 in a provincial town and rural area approximately three hours from Bangkok. Our approach is to identify men who can report on prevailing attitudes and norms within particular types of social groups and networks, thus we refer to the men we interviewed as informants.

The ten informants were recruited for interviews by a Thai research assistant and a Thai professional colleague through intermediaries in a local village, a construction site, a vocational school, and a motorcycle shop where they had personal contacts. It was explained to the intermediaries that we wished to speak with young men who were typical of the other young unmarried men at the site, had lots of friends and acquaintances, and would be willing to talk to us about norms and attitudes pertaining to sex prevailing in his particular social group. We stressed that what was important to us was not whether the informant himself visited commercial sex establishments frequently, rarely, or even at all, but rather that he knew what was going on among other men in his social group. We also stressed that we would be asking questions about sexual norms and attitudes within his group and not about the behavior of the informant.

Potential informants we were introduced to were then briefed on the nature of the study, and it was explained that the questions would be primarily about leisure activities in the group, would include questions about sexual activities, and would focus on current norms and attitudes regarding these particular types of sexual activities prevailing among male friends and associates of the informant. We again stressed that we would not be asking questions about the informant’s own behavior. We took this approach in order to minimize potential response bias. Since there has been an extensive campaign in Thailand to try to discourage commercial sex patronage (especially patronage unprotected by condom use) we did not want the informants to feel compelled to convince us that they were complying with these efforts. In practice, many of the men chose to use themselves as examples and our impression is that they were being very frank when doing so. No identifying information about the informants was recorded.

Two informants were farmers from a village about 30 kilometers outside of the provincial town, and were recruited through a motorcycle taxi contact from this village. Three informants were students at the technical college in the provincial town, and two others were teachers at the same school. These five informants were recruited through a professional contact, whose husband teaches at the school. Two informants were construction workers from rural areas who

5 Such frankness probably was due in large part to the fact that the men who did choose to talk about themselves did so on their own initiative rather than in response to direct inquiries. We found in a similar project conducted two years earlier that some men can be quite hesitant when queried directly to discuss aspects of their own sexual behavior that run contrary to social expectations, especially in the area of noncommercial relationships (VanLandingham et al. 1995a).
were working at a construction site in the provincial town; they were recruited by a research assistant through the site foreman. One informant was a salesman at a motorcycle shop in the provincial town, who was recruited through a professional contact. Of the ten informants who were interviewed, all were sexually experienced and between the ages of 18 - 26 (average age was 22). All were unmarried; at least nine were never married (the remaining case was unmarried but it was never completely clear whether he had ever been married). Background information about each informant is included in the table.

Our recruiters and intermediaries reported no refusals, but it is likely that they approached individuals whom they thought likely to participate. The informants cannot be considered to be a random sample in any sense. Informants were offered a small sum of money for their time; approximately half refused the gift.

All interviews were conducted in Thai by the first author. In four of the ten interviews, the interviewer was assisted by his Thai research assistant. The purpose of the study was explained once again to the informant, permission to record the interview was gained (there were no refusals at this point), and the interview took place in a secluded room or area with no one else within hearing distance. The interview opened with a few warm up questions about the informant’s work and family. Background information was then recorded, questions about the informant’s social networks were asked, and then the informant was asked a number of open-ended questions about his impressions of current sexual patterns among his friends and acquaintances, norms and attitudes underlying these patterns, and any recent changes that he perceived. There was special emphasis upon norms regarding commercial sex visitation and condom use, opportunities for noncommercial sex relations, and the nature of these noncommercial sex relationships.

The guidelines were finalized after five pretest interviews. Our use of identical guidelines for each informant allows for systematic comparisons across individuals and their respective social groups, while the open-ended nature of the discussions and interviews provided considerable leeway for the informants to express their views in detail and for the interviewer to explore relevant topics as they arose.

The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, and word processed in both the original Thai language and in English translation. The resulting English transcripts were then systematically coded and analyzed using text analysis software. Our classification and evaluation of the data employed two coding strategies. The first scheme was predetermined by the guidelines; transcript segments were classified by the topic being discussed. The second scheme followed an analytic induction approach (LeCompte and Preissle 1993) that classified

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6The one exception involved the interview of one of the technical school students. Towards the end of the interview, the Thai professional colleague (who is female) came into the room and listened to the final 10-15 minutes of the interview. The interview was quite general for the time she was there, and her presence did not appear to hamper the data collection. She was asked not to come into the room for the remaining interviews, to which she complied.

7We utilized The Ethnograph software program to expedite the systematic review of the content of the transcripts (Knodel 1993; Seidel et al. 1995).
segments by topics brought up by the informants and not anticipated in the guidelines. Intercoder reliability (ICR) was calculated using the following formula:

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ICR = \frac{\text{number of coding agreements}}{\text{number of coding agreements} + \text{number of coding disagreements}}
\]

ICR was assessed in the following manner. Both authors independently coded the first transcript and assessed ICR. Differences in the interpretation of the transcripts and codes were discussed and resolved, and then a second transcript was coded by each author. This process continued until ICR reached at least 90%, and then was discontinued. The first author coded the remaining transcripts.

Analysis employed results matrices to facilitate analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994; Knodel 1993). When discussing a particular finding, our aim is to convey the degree of consensus, portray the predominant opinion (where there is one), and indicate the distribution of views on the topic. We illustrate particular points using verbatim quotations.\(^8\)

**RESULTS**

One clear consensus to emerge from these interviews is that in the views of the informants, the sexual milieu has changed dramatically and rapidly over the last few years. This perception of dramatic change was noted by all.

I: Comparing the situation nowadays to, say, three years ago… talking about your friends’ groups, talking about going out to drink, out to do other things… has anything changed?
R: It is changing. It is changing a lot. (26-year-old urban salesman)

The specific nature of these changes involve differences in both the normative context and in the opportunity structure in which male sexual expression occurs.

**Changes in the Range of Sexual Partners Available for Early Sexual Encounters**

In contrast with prior survey data that indicate large proportions of unmarried men having their early sexual encounters exclusively with commercial sex workers (Nopkesorn et al. 1993; VanLandingham 1993; VanLandingham 1997), our informants describe a wide array of potential sexual partners for unmarried men.

I: For men who are not sexually experienced, what kind of women are [typically] their first [sex partner]?
R: Well … not good women.

\(^8\) The age, residence, and occupation of the interviewee are specified at the end of each quotation. Sometimes the quotes are extracted from a longer discussion, with intervening statements omitted for brevity. Implied meanings are enclosed in square brackets.
I: What do you mean ‘not good women’?
R: Going to the brothels… It is the prostitute. (24-year-old rural farmer)

I: Nowadays are there men who haven’t had experience, but have sexual need, and don’t want to go to prostitutes? Or are there men who want to have experience, but don’t want to go to prostitutes?
R: Sometimes they prefer their girlfriends, sometimes they do it [first] with their girlfriends.
I: So, they have the opportunity to sleep with their girlfriends?
R: These days, girls are brave. In secondary school, they are together in pairs. (22-year-old rural farmer)

I: Your friends who are [sexually] experienced; most of them will have experience with women of about what age?
R: Of about the same age. First they might be friends in classes. (26-year-old urban salesman)

In contrast with men who began their sexual lives during an earlier era, young men today appear to have available a much wider range of possible scenarios for embarking in sexual activity, whether their overall opportunities for sexual activity before marriage are either greater or less. These opportunities now include the long-established pattern of commercial sex patronage (for the men who dare to continue doing so), serious girlfriends, casual partners, and foregoing premarital sex altogether.

Changes in Commercial Sex Patronage

Impressions of trends in commercial sex patronage among the informants

Commercial sex visitation in a peer group context seems to be becoming a much rarer event in Thai society. While survey evidence indicates that there have long been some men who have opted out of premarital commercial sex (Sittitrai et al. 1992), five of our ten informants make explicit mention of a decline in the frequency of commercial sex patronage within their friendship networks, a finding consistent with recent survey and STD (Hanenberg and Rojanapithayakorn 1998) data, both of which suggest dramatic declines in the frequency of commercial sex patronage among young men.

I: Three or four years ago, did you know anyone who liked to go to prostitutes, before AIDS became well known?
R: (Actually) at that time, AIDS was here already, but there were still some who went.
I: If you compare the situation three to four years ago to nowadays, are there any changes?
R: What kinds of changes?
I: About going to prostitutes, about sleeping with women.
R: Mostly they don’t go to prostitutes. There is no one asking me to go. No one goes. (18-year-old urban student)

Survey data on commercial sex patronage is very likely to suffer from response bias (some men will be reluctant to admit to socially proscribed behaviors in the current climate).
This problem, while not completely eliminated with qualitative data, can be substantially reduced. We made a strong effort to establish rapport with our informants, and stressed that we were interested in what was really going on, not in what was supposed to be happening. Also the fact that our informants were allowed, and in fact encouraged, to focus on behaviors of individuals they knew (rather than their own behaviors) should also serve to substantially reduce response bias.

Although qualitative data obviously cannot be used to estimate distributions of behavior in a population, they can be extremely useful in a triangulation approach to corroborate survey data that have their own shortcomings. As it turns out, the qualitative results provide strong support for survey and STD data that suggest massive behavioral change. Seven of our ten informants say that they and/or their group goes less, very little, or not at all.9 This is in remarkable contrast to the early 1990s when most men readily professed to habitual commercial sex patronage. To what degree this change in reported behavior is due to response bias versus actual behavioral change is a topic that must be further explored in a representative national survey employing the most sophisticated social science techniques available. But no matter the outcome of such an assessment, the change in ideas regarding the propriety of these long standing patterns of male sexual behavior is remarkable. These changes are discussed in the following sections.

Rationales, pressures, and circumstances of commercial sex participation

Not only do early partnering patterns for sexual behavior appear to be in flux, but the rationales and circumstances of these early experiences seem to be in transition as well. Part of the justification underlying early male sexual activity involved the widespread idea that men need to be “trained” for sexual life. In the local idiom, this training is symbolized by the common use of the term kun crew (literally, ascend the teacher) to describe the teaching of sex to a young man by a commercial sex worker (Im-em 1999). While this logic still holds some currency among some informants interviewed for the current paper, it was not widespread. Only two of the ten informants brought up this rationale/justification for male commercial sex visitation, and one other specifically rejected it.

I: If they don’t go to prostitutes and try to have something with a girlfriend for the first time, what will happen?…
R: One has to have experience about it before.
I: If one has no experience, what will happen?
R: They don’t know what to do… Because we don’t know where the female’s [parts] are. We can’t find it. We don’t know. (24-year-old rural farmer)
I: So your friends are not out trying to gain [sexual] experience with women. But aren’t they afraid that they won’t know what to do when getting married? What do they think about this?
R: They think it is natural. Anyone can do it. (18-year-old urban student)

9 Of the remaining three, two reported little change; one said the group goes more often than before.
Other long-standing norms that have served to pressure men to gain experience in sexual life appear to be coming under scrutiny in at least some circles. Men coming of age sexually in an earlier era often faced significant peer pressure to participate in commercial sex, and at least for some, to forego condom use while doing so (VanLandingham et al. 1995b). As in other societies, the Thai male peer group is a critical element in the process of early Thai male socialization (Mulder 1990), and in the past these social pressures influenced many men to participate in normative patterns of sexual initiation, in which the peer group context was central (VanLandingham 1997; Maticka-Tyndale et al. 1997; Macqueen et al. 1996; Fordham 1995). No doubt this peer group context retains substantial influence in the development of what constitutes appropriate sexuality, but the norms themselves are in transition.

For all significant Thai social relationships, deference of younger/junior individuals to older/senior ones is axiomatic (Komin 1990). In the area of male sexual behavior, traditionally older friends or relatives would often encourage and pay for their younger friends to engage in commercial sex relations when the time was deemed appropriate (VanLandingham 1997). In this way, older young men passed on the traditional means of sexual initiation to their younger friends, and this no doubt served to maintain for a period sexual practices that became extremely dangerous during the AIDS era. This basic feature of older-younger [pi-nong] male peer relations is apparently being disrupted by the rapidly changing normative context, and some of the older informants express both surprise and frustration with their younger friends who are coming of age in an entirely new normative environment.

R: Sometimes friends asked us to go. Friends asked us to go out to have a ride in town, teasing girls... It was like making us want to go to a prostitute.
I: Making you think of it, or what?
R: Uh. It made us think that going [to a brothel] was good. But it was not really good. (22-year-old rural farmer)

I: [While you and your friends were at the brothel] did they suggest you should [have sex with a prostitute] too, or didn’t they say?
R: First they asked me to go as well, but I didn’t go.
I: Didn’t you think of going?
R: First I had an inclination to go, but when really going there, I didn’t dare.
I: Why didn’t you dare?
R: Because I used to see it, but I didn’t know, … I don’t know how to say it.
I: Was it repulsive to you?
R: It was not. But it was rather embarrassing to go in that place. (19-year-old urban student)

R: Some are not brave. They have never passed women before... They are around 16-17 years old. Not their time yet. They are not brave, but we [try to] convince them.
I: If we ask them to go to a prostitute, but they are not ready, what would they say?
R: Mostly they say they have no money, or “low budget”…
I: [I’ve heard that] if someone hasn’t enough money, their senior friend may pay for them, especially for those who have no experience with women before.
R: Oh. It used to happen. I used to call women for them, but they wouldn’t go… Whatever you do, they just won’t go. (21-year-old urban laborer, rural background)
Reasons for declining participation in commercial sex

One issue we probed in the informant interviews is the reasons why men have reduced their participation, for those informants who report knowing men who have done so. As we found in an earlier study on a similar topic (Knodel et al. 1996), the reasons these informants give for nonparticipation in commercial sex are for the most part of a practical nature, rather than a moralistic one. Moral themes were in fact notably absent from these discussions; only one informant expressed his group’s opposition in such terms.

I: In your group, why don’t they go to prostitutes? Are they not interested in it?
R: They don’t think it is good thing. So they aren’t interested in it.
I: What does it mean, “not a good thing”?
R: Going to a prostitute is not good. It is not appropriate for us at our age. (18-year-old urban student)

More practical reasons prevailed. Five of the ten informants refer to fears about AIDS (and other STDs) as a reason for the decreasing likelihood for men to visit commercial sex workers; one cites the expenses involved in going; another cites embarrassment. One informant reports that he goes only seldom because he knows he will be drinking, and does not trust himself to use condoms if he is drunk.

I: …for those who have no [sexual] experience, why don’t they go to brothels?
R: They don’t dare go. Afraid of diseases.
I: Afraid of diseases. What kinds of diseases?
R: AIDS. (18-year-old urban student, rural background)

R: …but [I only] go there once in while, not often, there may be AIDS.
I: Are you afraid?
R: I’m afraid of getting drunk. If drunk, I feel brave.
I: If you’re not drunk, you don’t go?
R: If I’m not drunk, then I don’t go. If drunk, I feel brave.
I: If you are drunk [and you go], do you use a condom?
R: …Sometimes I don’t use it because of being drunk. When getting drunk, I’m not thinking of other things. If I’m not drunk, then normally I use a condom. (21-year-old urban laborer, rural background)

This was the only instance of reported current nonuse of condoms while engaging in commercial sex relations after drinking. But if this informant represents a segment of the male commercial sex-patronizing population, e.g., a remaining core group of men who will continue to participate in unprotected sex with commercial sex workers (see Fordham 1993; 1995), the comment has serious implications for the men who continue to engage in these behaviors in spite of the risks of doing so, and for the women with whom they have sexual relations.

In traditional male social relationships, alcohol plays a very important role in the expression of manhood, gives a central focus to a male social circle, and provides an alibi for
what would otherwise be seen as irresponsible behaviors (VanLandingham 1997; Fordham 1995; MacQueen et al. 1996). The quote just above suggests that heavy drinking could be of great importance for men who continue to participate in unprotected commercial sex even in the face of increasing evidence of the dangers of doing so. In the face of widespread and aggressive campaigns to educate men about the dangers of AIDS, it is becoming more and more untenable for men to participate if sober. Thus the link between drinking and commercial sex visitation may be extremely difficult to break for some if there is a core group of men who continue to use intoxication as a rationalization for continued participation in unprotected commercial sex.

**Condom use with commercial sex workers**

It is difficult to know to what extent the decline in HIV and other STDS in Thailand is due to more men foregoing commercial sex visitation versus increased condom use among men who continue to go (Mastro and Limpakarnjanarat 1995), especially in the absence of a state-of-the-art, up-to-date national survey on sexual behavior. The available evidence, biased as it must be by increasing pressures for both commercial sex workers and their clients to report socially encouraged behaviors, indicates substantial increases in condom use. Numbers of condoms used are up; reported condom use behavior has also increased substantially (Hanenberg et al. 1994; Chamratrithirong 1999).

Our qualitative data are consistent with the results from these recent quantitative studies on condom use, which taken together strongly indicate remarkable increases in condom use among men who continue to engage in commercial sex. Four informants report consistent (always use) condom use in their networks; three report that men they know usually use them, but not under some special circumstances. Our informants indicate that the reasons for such increased condom use with commercial sex workers is both because of the success of the national 100% condom campaign, which makes it more difficult for men to purchase unprotected sex, and by many men’s own unwillingness to engage in unprotected sex in the current epidemiological environment.

I: [Regarding] the use of condoms, are they used more or less than before, say compared to 3-4 years ago?
R: Now it is more.
I: Is that right?
R: Because of news about AIDS. They [the commercial sex workers] bring out condoms and we take them. If we don’t use them, they don’t allow anything.
I: 3-4 years ago, was it necessary to use condoms? Did men mostly use condoms 2-3 years ago?
R: It wasn’t necessary.
I: ... How about these days?
R: Now they have to use them. (24 year old rural farmer)

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10 One informant reported that he himself never uses a condom during his visits to commercial sex establishments.
I: Compared to 3-4 years ago regarding using condoms: do men use them more or less now?
R: Now they use them more. In the past, there was not this dreadful disease. It has just appeared recently. When I was young, we didn’t use them.
I: Didn’t use them at all?
R: No, didn’t use them at all; not when I was 15-16. They’ve only had campaigns about 5-6 years.
I: Do men always use them nowadays?
R: Ah, now if the men don’t use condoms, women don’t allow them to lay down with them.
I: In your group, is the use of condom increasing?
R: Yes.
I: Has it increased to 100 per cent?
R: Yes. We are afraid as well, not only is it the women who are afraid. Our life is long. (25 year old urban laborer, rural background)

Three of the informants told of men they know who do not use condoms under some circumstances with commercial sex workers. In addition to the issue of intoxication discussed in the previous section, two informants describe special relationships between some clients and commercial sex workers that lead to a lower willingness to use condoms.

R: … 100% of Thai men use condoms [with commercial sex workers], except when they go to brothels and they are the regular customers. Too often [commercial sex workers] allow them not to wear condoms. (24-year-old urban teacher, rural background)

I: Nowadays if they are regular customers, are they forced to wear them?
R: Sometimes if they are regulars, they don’t wear them. (22-year-old rural farmer)

New forms: non-brothel based commercial sex and quasi-commercial sex

One other trend noted by several informants is an increasing propensity for men to contract for sex in non-brothel venues, e.g., restaurants and nightclubs. Such an adaptation is not surprising especially for the older informants (aged 22-26) who may find it the most difficult to completely forego any type of commercial sex, since they came of age during an era when commercial sex visitation by unmarried men was normative. Older men may also have the additional resources necessary to purchase the more expensive forms of commercial sex.11 This adaptation of moving from direct and inexpensive commercial sex to less direct and more expensive commercial sex was noted explicitly in 4 of the 6 interviews of older informants.

I: I would like to ask about your friends’ groups or about men you know, if they have free time, might they go to prostitutes, or brothels, or massage parlors? Are there many people who do this?
R: err...for those going to brothels, there is none. For those going to entertainment places and meeting women, there are some. (26-year-old urban salesman)

11 Distinguishing between the influence of AIDS (a period effect) and the maturation of the informants and their friends (an age effect) on this phenomenon is difficult in the absence of a series of cohort studies or at least a series of cross sectional surveys of men at different ages.
R: Yes. Sometimes we go to prostitutes.
I: Where do they go; restaurants, or brothels, or massage parlors, or what...?
R: Calling it politely a restaurant… because we can also sit and drink inside it. They open it as a
restaurant, but they have women [for hire], too. (22-year-old rural farmer)

While the above scenario is a clear manifestation of commercial sex, albeit less explicit
than brothel based commercial sex, other types of sexual relationships fell less clearly into a
commercial sex category. For example, the issue of picking up women for sex (or at least trying
to) at pubs and bars came up frequently. One informant mentioned exchanging money for this
type of sex. It is unclear how frequently these types of quasi-commercial sexual encounters occur
and what the range of relationships between the participants are, but what is clear is that these
arrangements are quite distinct from the longstanding brothel based transactions.

I: If we would like to sleep with them, do they ask for money?
R: Not certain. I think there should be some who ask for money of which they spend for
entertainment (19-year old urban student)

Changes in Noncommercial Romantic Relationships

Concurrent with these changes in the normative and attitudinal context of commercial
(and quasi-commercial) sex relationships we find changes in noncommercial romantic
relationships between young Thai men and women as well. These changes in the context of
romantic relationships are even more difficult to assess than the changes in the commercial sex
environment discussed in the sections above. These special difficulties arise from longstanding
and fairly strong norms against noncommercial sex relationships before marriage - we know little
about the nature of these types of relationships (e.g., how often they involve sexual relations),
especially prior to the surveys of the early 1990s.

Early observers of Thai rural life have noted that noncommercial sex relationships were
not rare (Klausner 1987), but compared with today, there were likely fewer opportunities for men
and women to pursue these relationships because of the close supervision afforded by a village
setting. But the migration of young men and women to Bangkok and to other cities has resulted
in greater opportunities for men and women to pursue sexual relationships unsupervised by
family and other village members (Thaweesit 2000; Ford and Saiprasert 1993). Recent survey
data indicate that general attitudes and behavior among youth about premarital sexual relations
are likely becoming more liberal (Isarabhakdi and Cornwell 1995). Our informants perceive
changes in the same direction, and interpret them to be due to increasing fears related to sex with
commercial sex workers; increasing opportunities for noncommercial sex relations; and changing
views of women about male commercial sex patronage.

Men’s increasing fears of commercial sex patronage

An increasing fear among men of commercial sex patronage is apparent from the above
discussion of changes in the context of commercial sex patronage. Moreover, in three cases the
perceived advantages of noncommercial sex relationships in this respect are cited quite directly.
I: Asking about sleeping with ordinary women (puying tamada) [not commercial sex workers] nowadays and in the past, for men you know, in the past 3-4 years, is the chance having a [sexual] affair with ordinary women increasing or decreasing?
R: It may be increasing, because becoming involved with ordinary women doesn’t risk contracting the dreadful disease. (25-year-old urban laborer, rural background)

I: For your group or for people you know, are there any who like to go to prostitutes?
R: Only a few. They had girlfriends.
I: So, they didn’t like to go to prostitutes?
R: No.
I: They would have girlfriends, not going to servicewomen?
R: It was rare. That’s because diseases were spreading. They didn’t dare to go to prostitutes. (18-year-old urban student, rural background)

I: For friends in your group, those you know, do most of them have some [sexual] experience with women? Have they had experience with women before?
R: Some of them do.
I: For those who have had experience, what types of women did they have this experience with?
R: Students like us.
…
I: Are there any looking for women serving food in restaurants?
R: No. No one likes that.
I: Why don’t they like to have affairs with easy women?
R: Easy women aren’t good. We know, so we don’t go.
I: What does it mean, not good? Why are they bad?
R: It is like they are promiscuous. They can give us diseases. (18-year-old urban student)

Increasing opportunities for noncommercial sex relations

Qualitative data collected for the current study suggest that many men feel that at least some women their age have fairly relaxed norms regarding premarital sexual relations. Five of the ten informants report high or increasing opportunities for premarital sexual relations compared to a few years ago; two report declining or low opportunities.

I: Are there many women who will have sexual relations with men before marriage, talking about women who are not prostitutes?
R: There are. There are a lot.
I: Are there a lot?
R: A lot. Now there are a lot.
I: Why do you think a woman might have a [sexual] affair with a man if she doesn’t think the guy will be her future husband? …
R: They feel satisfied with it. They satisfy one another and agree about it. That’s it. There is nothing more to it than that.
I: It depends on their satisfaction. I don’t quite understand, what does it mean “satisfaction”?
R: Well, it has to do with the guy’s appearance, character, how handsome. They like them and go with them.
I: Isn’t that similar to how men think?
R: It is the same. (26-year-old urban salesman)

R: We meet in town. Just goofing around and flirting; [sometimes] with success.
I: If you and your friends are flirting with women, and you like them, what happens next?
R: We have our friends go and contact them for us. Telling them we love them, we like them, stuff like that.
I: So if the guy and the woman both like one another that way, would the guy have a chance to
sleep with her or not?
R: If the woman didn’t like us, not so sure [it would be unlikely]. But if they liked us, there was a
very good chance. (18-year-old urban student, rural background)

It is clear in the above quotations that along with this perception of opportunities for sex
with noncommercial sex peers exists an explicit recognition of sexual desire and willingness to
experiment among their female contemporaries. These opportunities for sexual experimentation
before marriage with female peers are probably replacing, for many men, the more one-sided
sexual experimentation with commercial sex workers that has become dangerous. Some of the
implications of this change in power dynamics between men and women are discussed in the
remaining sections of the paper.

Changing views of women about male commercial sex patronage

Thai women coming of age today are less tolerant of male commercial sex patronage than
were their predecessors (Saengtienchai et al. 1999; Knodel et al. 1999), and this normative
change among women is undoubtedly also influencing male attitudes about commercial sex vis B
vis noncommercial sex sexual relations. While most of our male informants perceive fairly
widespread opportunities for noncommercial romantic and sexual relationships, one noted that
this would not be the case for men who were known to continue participating in commercial sex.
While information about these outings were probably rarely shared with female significant others
in the past, keeping such activities secret may be even more important now that female tolerance
for such activities is declining.

I: For the men in your group, would you say that their chances to have sex with an ordinary
woman [not a commercial sex worker] has increased or decreased in the past few years?
R: Nowadays? It is less.
I: Why is that?
R: Women know about us and so don’t want to get involved with us… If they know we behave
like this [visit commercial sex workers], they despise us… They hate it that we behave badly…
going to prostitutes. (24-year-old rural farmer)

I: But if friends are going to brothels, going to prostitutes… do they discuss it?
R: They don’t tell.
I: They don’t tell. They don’t talk about it in a group of friends? Don’t they discuss it?
R: They are afraid that friends will talk about it with others.
I: With whom do they fear their friends talking?
R: Their girlfriends. (24-year-old rural farmer)
Perceived advantages and disadvantages of noncommercial sex relationships for men

Absent from the interviews were discussions of possible advantages of noncommercial sex over commercial sex relationships. While this was not an explicit topic of investigation, neither was the topic of the advantages of commercial sex over noncommercial sex relations; nevertheless this latter topic did arise spontaneously in three of the informant interviews.

I: Didn’t they like their girlfriends?
R: Women. Sometimes they [our friends] were bored with women. They didn’t do like the men wished. So we had to go to servicewomen. (18-year-old urban student, rural background)

R: Yes. It takes quite some time to find [ordinary women; not a commercial sex worker] women. If finding one, it is also difficult to separate. It takes a long time to find and a long time to separate. (19-year-old urban student)

R: For me, most were easy women, more in brothels. Because there was no bond. We knew how they were, and they knew how we were. (24-year-old urban teacher, rural background)

But even in the absence of direct evidence, we anticipate that noncommercial romantic and sexual relationships will hold a number of advantages for Thai men in addition to the (already) clear perception that noncommercial sex partners are much less of a risk for HIV and other STDS. Specifically, we hypothesize that the increased privacy and intimacy of a noncommercial sex relationship is probably attractive to many men. However, in our own data such perceptions of increased privacy were alluded to only once.

They [the men] don’t talk openly about this. [A couple] going out together, riding on the motorbike. We don’t know, and this shouldn’t be brought in to talk about in the group. (25-year-old urban laborer, rural background)

Condom use in noncommercial sex relations

A final feature to be considered in this changing normative context of noncommercial sexual relationships regards condom use. If commercial sex encounters are increasingly protected by condom use, there is rising concern about the degree to which noncommercial sex encounters are becoming an important vehicle for the spread of HIV. While the recent decline in incidence is welcome news, the large number of currently infected but otherwise healthy young Thai men (and increasingly, women) has dire implications for the future spread of the epidemic.

Our qualitative data suggest that the generally held fear among public health officials that many noncommercial sexual relationships are unlikely to be covered by condom use is likely to be a valid supposition. Among our ten informants, three reported that their peers used only or primarily pills for contraception with noncommercial sex partners; four reported a mix of condoms and pills (often using condoms for more casual partners and pills for more serious ones), and one (one of the two youngest students) reported a preference for condoms within his group.
I: Have friends ever told you about the method of contraception they use?
R: Some buy pills. Some use condoms.
I: Men who use condoms, do they use them to prevent their girlfriends’ pregnancy or are they more afraid of disease?
R: Preventing pregnancy.
I: Haven’t they ever been afraid of diseases from [noncommercial sex] women?
R: No.
I: Even if the women had boyfriends before, they aren’t afraid of contracting a disease from having sex with a [noncommercial sex] women?
R: Well ..., well ..., they do some, but ...
I: Not so much.
R: Right. (18-year-old urban student)

I: If men you know have [sexual] affairs with women, what contraception do they mostly use? Have they ever told?
R: Using pills.
I: Isn’t there anyone using condoms with women who are their girlfriends?
R: A few. I don’t quite like [condoms] myself. Mostly they use pills.
I: Aren’t men afraid of women having sex with other men and having diseases which they can contact?
R: They never think about that because of being boyfriend-girlfriend. (24-year-old urban teacher)

I: And for friends in your group, assuming that they sleep with that kind of women [not a sex worker], would they use a condom?
R: If we haven’t known the women before, meeting for the first time, we should use condom. I: If they know each other, don’t they use one?
R: If they know each other for long time, close together, they don’t use it. (18-year-old urban student, rural background)

There was one instance in which an informant explained that within his peer group, concerns about passing HIV along to one’s girlfriend is a reason for consistent condom use with commercial sex workers, but the comment was elicited by the interviewer’s probes.

I: Erh...if they have girlfriends, they don’t use condoms at the brothel? At the brothel, do they use?
R: Some use. Some don’t use.
I: Meaning that if friends are going to the brothel, do all of them use a condom, or only some of them will use?
R: Some of them use, but those who have girlfriends will use.
I: Ah...Why do they use if they have girlfriends?
R: They are afraid their girlfriends will get disease. (24-year-old rural farmer)

CONCLUSIONS

While the serological evidence indicating a sea change in patterns of sexual behavior is quite compelling, the particular behavioral patterns driving these changes in seroprevalence and incidence remain undocumented. It is a separate issue and outside the scope of this study whether
men currently coming of age have sex more or less frequently, with a greater or lesser number of partners, with a greater or lesser number of types of partners, and with a higher or lower level of condom use. These issues must be answered by a state-of-the-art and nationally representative survey of sexual behavior.

There is likewise a lack of information regarding the changes in attitudes and norms underlying these behavioral changes. A qualitative approach can provide insights into the ways in which Thai men (and women) are adapting to changes in the social and epidemiological context of sexual life through the systematic analysis of a series of open ended questions asked of a sample of well placed informants from a limited set of social backgrounds.

There are also important limitations to such an approach. Because of the necessity of using small samples and the special logistical requirements for recruiting appropriate informants, qualitative data such as presented here cannot be considered to be representative of any population in a statistical sense. Our goal is rather to recruit and interview informants who are well connected and well informed about our social groups of interest. Second, since our informants have been aging during the period of interest, their comments about changes over time can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from changes due to their own maturation. However, in most cases their explicit connection between behavioral change and AIDS demonstrates the importance of the changing epidemiological and social context. Third, it is possible that our informants bias their responses to us in a socially desirable manner. We feel that we minimized this possibility by taking a completely nonjudgmental approach to the topic in our interviews and by focusing our questions on people the informants know, rather than on the informants themselves. The frequent reporting of attitudes and behavior that go against what would be socially desirable makes us confident that we were largely successful. Still, the possibility of response bias, even if significantly lower than what would be the case in a survey on this topic, must be recognized.

The ten informants interviewed for this paper are keenly aware of the increased risks of commercial sex liaisons, especially when these sexual contacts are not protected by condom use. Consistent with the profound changes in behavior suggested by recent survey and STD data, most of the men in the networks represented by the informants have responded to these increased risks by reducing the frequency of visits, increasing the use of condoms, or by stopping commercial sex visitation altogether.

Underlying these changes in behavior are profound changes in attitudes and group norms regarding sex, especially commercial sex. Views of commercial sex patronage have shifted from fun and normative to worrisome and questionable. As these changes in individual attitudes spread among young men, a decline in peer pressure to participate in risky sexual practices has followed. Men are more likely than before to encourage each other not to go, and in cases where (usually a little older) men do try to pressure young men to participate, it is much easier in the current normative environment for the younger men to decline.

It is not only commercial sex relationships that are changing. Profound changes in noncommercial sex relationships will have important implications for both the spread of HIV and for male-female relations generally. Our informants report that having opportunities for noncommercial sex before marriage are not at all exceptional. Changes in the normative sexual environment for women appear to be making noncommercial sexual opportunities for men more
common; but at the same time the acceptance among women of commercial sex patronage for their male lovers is much less than it once was. Men who put both themselves and their current or future noncommercial sexual partners at risk by engaging in commercial sex may find that romantic or sexual opportunities outside of the commercial sex arena are consequently diminished.

The lack of condom use in noncommercial sex relationships is cause for concern for the men and women who are both old enough to have come of age when unprotected brothel based sex was more common, and young enough to subscribe to the more relaxed norms now governing noncommercial sex relationships. Cohorts of young men and women coming of age during this transitional period should be targeted by aggressive campaigns designed to encourage condom use for all types of premarital sex.

If commercial sex transactions can be expected to continue to decline as a normative expression of male sexuality, and if noncommercial sex relations can be expected to continue to become more commonplace, it is less clear what can be expected for relationships that can be easily classified as neither. Intimate relationships between Thai men and women that cannot be categorized as sex worker/client, but have the exchange of money or resources as a key element have been around for as long as recorded Thai history. Such relationships may eventually replace the standard brothel based sex relationships that are now in decline. If so, then these relationships that mix pecuniary, hierarchical, and emotional components will present a new set of challenges for controlling HIV and other STDs. For one, being non-brothel based, they will be much more difficult to monitor. Second, if men retain disproportionate power in hierarchical and pecuniary sexual relationships, it may be difficult for women to negotiate issues such as condom use. Third, the emotional component of these relationships is likely to be on average significantly higher than in more conventional commercial sex relationships, which can work for or against safe sexual practices. More emotional attachment could lead to more communication and concern for each other’s welfare, (although such concern about the welfare of partners was generally absent from the discussion about noncommercial sex partners in the current study). Increased emotional intimacy could also work against condom use if condoms are seen to be a barrier to intimacy.

In addition to the qualitative results presented in this study, and the large number of informative but limited surveys on the topic (e.g., of soldiers), Thailand needs an ongoing state-of-the-art national survey of sexual behavior. Patterns of sexual behavior are changing rapidly, and these changes have profound implications for not only the spread of HIV and other STDs, but also for marriage and fertility rates, gender relations, and economic transfers. Both behavioral and serological data should be collected for a national sample over a period of several years so that we gain a more accurate picture of the distribution of risk taking behaviors and infection rates within the entire adolescent and young adult population, the nature of the links between behavior and infection, key covariates of behavior and infection, and differences in the rates of change among age cohorts and other key subgroups over time. Obtaining accurate reports of unobserved behavior is a formidable challenge in the current climate that problematizes formerly acceptable behavior patterns, but we have learned a great deal in the past decade about how to maximize the accuracy of such responses. Using anonymous self-administered questionnaires, for example, has been shown to vastly improve the accuracy of self-reports of behavior that are
considered socially problematic (London et al. 1997). The national quantitative data arising from such a survey should be supplemented with ongoing qualitative data collection to assess how the normative context and individual attitudes shift alongside these behavioral and epidemiological trends.

Given the high level of social science research expertise found in Thailand, the dedication of its national leaders to addressing the problem of HIV/AIDS, and the sophisticated and frank discussions of sexuality currently occurring within the Thai populace, the rest of us would stand to learn a great deal from a study documenting the extensive changes now underway, as well as the causes and consequences of these changes.
Bibliography


Figure: Background characteristics of the informants

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<th>Case #</th>
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*Currently works in urban area but has rural background.*