

## Thai views of sexuality and sexual behaviour<sup>\*</sup>

John Knodel<sup>a</sup>, Mark VanLandingham<sup>b</sup>, Chanpen Saengtienchai<sup>c</sup> and Anthony Pramualratana<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Population Studies Center, University of Michigan

<sup>b</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Washington

<sup>c</sup> Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

<sup>d</sup> Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Bangkok

### Abstract

**This study focuses on how married Thai men and women interpret sexuality and sexual behaviour in the context of their own social lives. We start by examining general views of male and female sexuality and then explore how these views relate to premarital, marital and extramarital heterosexual sex. Our study is based on qualitative data from a variety of segments of Thai society derived through the use of focus group discussions and individual focused in-depth interviews.**

Research into sexuality, sexual behaviour and related attitudes in Thailand, as in much of the rest of the developing world, has been stimulated by recent concerns about the worldwide AIDS pandemic and, to some extent, by the increasing international attention to issues related to gender. In Thailand, increasing interest in sexual behaviour has been further fuelled by the spread of the AIDS virus from marginalized groups into mainstream Thai society. Sexual networks facilitating this spread of HIV infection in Thailand link prostitutes with their male customers, and the customers with their wives and non-commercial sex partners (Brown et al. 1994).

The key role played by commercial sex in male social life and in the spread of HIV in Thailand is reflected by the widespread availability and patronage of commercial sex outlets by men (Boonchalaksi and Guest 1994). This aspect of Thai society has a long tradition, at least in urban areas, although commercial sex has undoubtedly expanded in recent decades, at least until the onset of widespread awareness of the national HIV/AIDS epidemic (Bamber, Hewison, and Underwood 1993; Knodel 1993a; Wilson and Henley 1994). There is an enormous range of venues through which commercial sex is offered, including straightforward brothels, massage parlours, bars, nightclubs and cafes where hostesses are available on a discretionary basis for sex after closing hours. Homosexual sex is also available for men although by no means on the same scale as heterosexual commercial sex.

---

<sup>\*</sup>This report is part of the project 'The Influence of Primary Female Partners and Male Peers on Male Extramarital Sexual Behaviour in Thailand' funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and conducted jointly by the Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University and the Population Studies Center, University of Michigan. Helpful comments on an earlier draft were provided by Wassana Im-Em.

High levels of patronage of prostitutes are evident from estimates provided by several surveys. Because of differences in methodologies, sampling and accuracy, precise comparisons between different estimates are not possible. However, they all confirm substantial levels of prostitute visitation and indicate such activity is higher among single men, but not negligible for married men.<sup>1</sup> Levels of non-commercial heterosexual relations among unmarried Thais may be increasing, and homosexual relations are reported by substantial numbers of Thai men who also engage in heterosexual relations (London, VanLandingham and Grandjean 1995). All of these features of Thai sexual life facilitate the spread of HIV throughout Thai society.

Both the dynamics of the AIDS epidemic in Thailand and the patterns of sexual behaviour underlying them are quite distinct from those found in many other societies, especially in the West, and can be puzzling to observers interested in stemming the spread of the epidemic. For example, the widespread practice of patronage of prostitutes is the source of frequent consternation in this literature, but surprisingly little of this research explores how these behavioural patterns are interpreted by the individuals participating in and affected by them. Understanding how Thai men and women themselves perceive gender differences in sexuality and relate this to gender-specific patterns of sexual behaviour is essential for any study of the broader Thai system of gender relations.

In this paper we focus on how married Thai men and women interpret sexuality and sexual behaviour in the context of their own social lives. We start by examining general views of male and female sexuality and then explore how these views relate to premarital, marital and extramarital heterosexual relations.<sup>2</sup> Our study is based on systematically derived in-depth qualitative data from a variety of segments of Thai society. It thus differs from much of the emerging body of research on sexual issues in Thailand, which consists largely of either quantitative analysis of responses to relatively simple survey questions or interpretive analysis of a small number of cases based on participant observation of relatively local settings.

Population-based estimates of behaviour and attitudes from analysis of survey data are clearly needed, although many issues regarding the interpretations and meaning of sexuality

---

<sup>1</sup>In a recent study of unmarried military recruits, with an average age of 22, 87 per cent reported having had sex with a prostitute at some time (VanLandingham et al. 1993). According to the 1990 urban survey by Deemar (1990), 27 per cent of single men (age 15 and older) and 9 per cent of married men reported sex with a prostitute in the previous 12 months. Higher levels were found in the 1990 Partner Relations Survey: 40 per cent of urban and 38 per cent of rural never-married men reported sex with a commercial sex partner during the last 12 months and 22 per cent of urban and 9 per cent of rural married men living with a spouse reported having commercial sex during the previous year (Sittitrai et al. 1992). There is some indication, based on a 1993 study using a questionnaire and sample resembling that of the 1990 Partner Relations Survey, that visits to prostitutes may have declined very recently, presumably in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Thongthai and Guest 1995). In addition, statistics based on periodic surveys of commercial sex establishments by the Ministry of Public Health, indicate a decline of over 20 per cent between 1989 and 1994 in the number of prostitutes enumerated, again suggestive of a decline in patronage (Rojanapithayakorn and Hanenberg 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Given that much of the analysis contrasts behaviour of single and married persons, it is relevant to note that the age of marriage in Thailand is not early, particularly in urban areas, and has been rising during recent decades. According to the 1990 census, the singulate mean age at marriage is 25.9 for men and 23.5 for women nationally and 28.3 for men and 26.5 for women in municipal areas. For both men and women, the age at marriage rose 1.5 years between 1970 and 1990. As might be assumed from these ages of marriage, substantial percentages of men and women in their twenties are single. For example, the 1990 census indicates that among 20-24 year olds, 70 per cent of men and 48 per cent of women are single nationally while 82 per cent of men and 69 per cent of women in this age group are single in municipal areas (Thailand, National Statistical Office, no date).

and sexual behaviour are difficult to explore using this format. Likewise, interpretations of sexual behaviour derived from participant observation can provide important insights into social phenomena. Nevertheless, there is also a need for more systematic collection and analysis of qualitative data, as attempted in the present study. If conducted properly, such an approach can combine to some degree the more systematic features of the survey approach with the more interpretive nature of ethnographic methods and thus contribute significantly to the establishment of an adequate empirical basis for understanding sexuality and sexual behaviour within a social scientific framework.

### **Data sources and methods**

Data for our analysis were collected through the dual techniques of focus-group discussions and focused in-depth individual interviews. A total of 14 focus groups involving 113 participants were held in Bangkok (with factory workers, residents of organized slums, and middle-class occupational groups), two provincial towns in the Central region, and villages in the surrounding area of the two towns. The field work took place during the latter part of 1993 and early 1994. Parallel but separate discussions were held with men and women. We also conducted focused in-depth interviews in the same locations with 21 men and 26 women. All study informants had been married and the majority were currently living with their spouses. Almost all were between ages 25 and 40. Our selection of study informants was purposive and largely opportunistic, provided they were married and within our target age group, and often involved the aid of intermediaries (see VanLandingham et al. 1995).

The emphasis on urban sites was deliberate since opportunities for commercial sex encounters are substantially higher in urban settings, where commercial sex establishments are concentrated. Moreover opportunities for extramarital affairs with non-commercial partners are also likely to be greater for urban than rural men. These were important concerns for the original purpose of the project which was to examine the influence of peers and wives on male extramarital sexual activity. This urban emphasis is likely to influence the results towards a heightened awareness of both commercial and non-commercial extramarital sex. Still, the inclusion of at least some rural focus groups and interviewees and the purposive selection of several different social-class milieux in Bangkok ensure that the data represent the views and behaviour of a fairly wide spectrum of Thai society.

It is more difficult to say how much the use of intermediaries and the opportunistic nature of the selection of our sample influence our findings. Participants for the focus groups of men and women factory workers in Bangkok were recruited in connection with a continuing AIDS-awareness project; this undoubtedly meant that the participants were more knowledgeable about AIDS and more sensitive to the dangers of risky behaviour than would otherwise be the case. More generally, we attempted to be quite open about the nature of the topics to be discussed during the recruitment process for all focus groups and in-depth interviews. Plausible arguments in opposite directions could be made as to the effect of this. For example, the fact that a person is willing to participate in our research could select for more worldly types who, in the case of husbands, are more likely to have sex outside of marriage, or in the case of wives, to have spouses who are prone to do so. In contrast, the fact that we were open about the topics to be discussed might select against those who felt they had something to hide.

While we have no precise way to judge, our general impression is that the range of persons involved in both the focus groups and the in-depth interviews was not particularly skewed for the particular groups we purposively targeted. As with all qualitative research, however, no claim can be made of representativeness in any statistical sense.

In the case of the focus groups, interaction among participants was encouraged and is considered a major advantage of the method. In contrast, the focused in-depth interviews took place on a one-to-one basis and were usually held in a private setting to ensure confidentiality. Both approaches proceeded on the basis of prepared guidelines which focused and structured the discussion or interview on the topics in which we were interested, yet allowed considerable leeway for the informants to express their views of a situation (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1992; Morgan 1996). The focus groups concentrated on determining prevailing norms, attitudes and general observations regarding this topic, while the focused in-depth interviews explored personal behavioural patterns and their underlying rationale as well as attitudes. At the same time, to the extent appropriate, parallel questions were posed to focused group participants and to interview respondents.<sup>3</sup>

Both the discussions and interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed and translated. The combined Thai and English transcripts serve as the data for analysis. We used the Ethnograph software program, designed to assist in analysis of qualitative data, to expedite the systematic review of the content of the transcripts in relation to the particular topics discussed (Seidel, Friese and Leonard 1995). We coded transcript text segments in terms of topics and categories of interest in order to derive 'overview grids' that provided a systematic summary of contents. These were usually done independently by those involved in the analysis and then compared in order to check reliability and to resolve differences in assessments of the content of the transcripts when they arose. This procedure facilitated judging how common particular themes were in the discussions and interviews as well as the extent of consensus and diversity of opinion (Knodel 1993b:47-49). When describing findings, we attempt to portray both the predominant opinion, and the diversity of views expressed when consensus is lacking.

Illustrative verbatim quotations from the focus groups or individual interviews are included in the following analysis. In each quotation, the location and type of group or interviewee from which it is drawn is indicated. In the focus-group quotations, participants are identified by the first initial of their first name in order to protect confidentiality. Sometimes the comments are extracted from a longer discussion, omitting intervening statements for the sake of brevity.

In brief, unlike survey questionnaires, the qualitative techniques used in this study allow the researcher soliciting information to elaborate on the questions being asked and encourage study informants to explain their answers, with all the detail recorded and available for analysis. Moreover, the conversational nature of our approach fosters rapport which is crucial when dealing with potentially sensitive sexual issues. At the same time, unlike much qualitative research, our approach is relatively systematic both with respect to data collection and in the style of analysis, and makes clear the source of evidence on which we base our interpretations.

### **Male and female sexuality**

The sexuality of males and females is considered to be fundamentally different by both Thai men and women. Men are widely perceived as having a natural and driving need for sex that requires frequent outlet. In contrast, women are viewed as being in control of their sexual feelings which are seen to be far less pronounced than those of men. This difference was expressed repeatedly in both focus-group discussions and focused in-depth interviews and is

---

<sup>3</sup>Because of the difference in the nature of the two data collection techniques, we refer to focus-group discussion *participants* and to in-depth interview *respondents*. When we wish to refer to both together, we use the term *informants*.

consistent with anthropological and survey results. Anthropologists have noted that sexual desire is an integral feature of Thai conceptions of maleness (Keyes 1986; Fordham 1995). According to a 1990 urban survey by the Deemar Company (1990), 80 per cent of men and 75 per cent of women agree that 'it is natural for a man to pursue sex at every opportunity'.

The male urge for sexual intercourse is seen, particularly by women, as in the very nature of men, essentially as a basic physiological need or instinct. In much the same way as men need to eat to relieve hunger, they need sexual intercourse as an outlet for their sexual drive. In contrast, women are viewed by both sexes as typically having considerably less need and desire for sex. Some expressed the view that sex was of little importance to women. More commonly, women were viewed as also having sexual feelings but of a weaker and more controllable nature than the sex drive felt by men.

Respondent: I think all men feel sexual desire instinctively... They need it since they are men. It's something natural for men. They have strong sexual desire and need some outlet. (Case 27 Lopburi urban female)

Mr S1: Men feel it (sexual desire) all the time. Men are like that but only few women feel it that way.

Mr N: If women feel it, they can keep it better than men. They are reserved.

Mr S2: Women would keep it to themselves but men would not. If men feel the desire, they must find ways out. (Bangkok male factory worker group)

Mr T: To have sexual intercourse is like having meals. We have to have it every day.

Mr P: If we don't have it, it is like something is still missing. (Kanchanaburi urban male group)

In the views of a number of our informants, the sexual needs of men, married or not, include the desire for a variety of sexual partners. Such comments arose most frequently in connection with discussion of the reason some married men continue to engage in extramarital sex. The parallel between men's sexual appetite and appetite for food was evident in the frequent expression that married men require a 'change of flavour'. Both men and women voiced the opinion that men can become bored with sex with the same woman and need at least an occasional variation in partners. Our informants noted that not all men are the same in this respect, but nevertheless many married men are thought to want at least an occasional chance to have intercourse with someone other than their wives.

Interviewer: Why do you think married men go on taking prostitutes?

Respondent: I think it's in their nature... Men naturally want to try something new. (Case 22 Lopburi urban female)

Moderator: I wonder why a married man still has to visit prostitutes?

Mrs S: He is bored with his wife.

Mrs J: Maybe he isn't bored with his wife but he wants to try something new.

Mrs S: He wants a change of flavour. (Bangkok middle class female group)

Interviewer: Why do married men go see prostitutes since they already have a wife?

Respondent: They are probably bored with their wives. It is like having the same type of food with the same flavour every day. It is boring. (Case 18 Lopburi rural male)

## Premarital sex

### *Premarital patronage of prostitutes*

In discussing male sexual behaviour and related attitudes in Thailand, whether in regard to premarital or extramarital sex, it is important to distinguish between commercial and non-commercial contacts. Commercial sex involves an explicit, typically on-the-spot monetary payment, after which the obligations of the customer end. Non-commercial sex partners usually require a greater investment in time and resources on the part of the man and involve a greater emotional investment from both parties. Indeed, in the case of single couples, the expectation of marriage or at least a strong possibility of an enduring relationship is necessary before some women consent to sex. In most contexts the distinction between a commercial and a non-commercial relationship is clear to the people involved and the ensuing fundamentally different implications are typically accepted by both parties (VanLandingham et al. 1995; Fordham 1995).

We also attempted to distinguish between various types of sexual behaviour viewed as ordinary (normal or common) and viewed as appropriate or proper. In Thai, perhaps more than in English, the terms for 'ordinary' (*amada*) and 'appropriate' (*mohsom*) overlap somewhat. Some respondents thought that some sexual practices (e.g., visiting prostitutes) may be *tamada* (in the sense of being unremarkable) but not *mohsom*; others implied that some practices were *mohsom* by virtue of being so *tamada* (in the sense of being widespread).

Results from our focus groups and in-depth interviews indicate that both Thai men and women recognize that visiting prostitutes is common in Thailand and generally view it as a normal activity for single men. In in-depth interviews, both men and women respondents almost universally considered it to be an ordinary practice. Given the common perception that male sexuality involves a strong natural sexual urge requiring periodic release, men and women alike view visiting prostitutes as a legitimate outlet for men without a regular partner. Indeed of the 21 men interviewed, 17 reported having patronized commercial sex establishments before marriage. Sex with a prostitute is clearly a common experience for Thai males and perceived to be so by the general public.

Moderator: Mostly as I listen, (you say) unmarried men can go for sexual entertainment...

Mrs N: It's a common matter.

Mrs S: It's just like his releasing pressure, draining it away. (Bangkok middle class female group)

Interviewer: Do you think it's common for men to see prostitutes before they get married?

Respondent: I think it's common. It's okay. We are males. Why do we have to keep it pressed inside? It's common. (Case 20 Lopburi urban male)

Although there is widespread agreement that it is common for unmarried men to have sex with prostitutes, it is not universally approved, especially by women. When probed, two-thirds of the women but less than a third of the men in-depth respondents in our study expressed reservations about the appropriateness of premarital commercial sex patronage. A somewhat similar gender difference in attitudes towards single males visiting prostitutes was found in a 1993 quasi-national survey.<sup>4</sup> The risk of infection from sexually transmitted

---

<sup>4</sup>Of male respondents, 43 per cent compared to 54 per cent of women said it was wrong for a single man to visit a prostitute (Thongthai and Guest 1995). The choice given the survey respondents, being

diseases (STDs) was frequently and spontaneously cited, particularly by women, as a reason against single men going to prostitutes. Overall, female respondents were more than twice as likely as men to mention STDs when discussing whether visiting prostitutes was common or appropriate for single men. While AIDS was only occasionally mentioned by name, it was clear that many thought the situation today was more dangerous than in the past.

Interviewer: Is it suitable for single men to take prostitutes?

Respondent: It was okay in the past since there was no AIDS. In the past, there were some other venereal diseases and they were not very dangerous... (Case 3 Bangkok female trader)

Respondent: There is AIDS now. In the past, it was okay. Now, it's dangerous... In the past, men only got venereal diseases. Now, there is AIDS so men had better keep their virginity. (Case 44 Kanchanaburi urban male)

Respondent: They should not do it often. Those single men are young and they can't be sure of the girls they take. Some prostitutes may be infected with AIDS. They can end their lives. (Case 5 Bangkok female grocer)

Besides soliciting attitudes towards premarital patronage of prostitutes, we also inquired about how women felt about their husbands' prior experiences with prostitutes. There was a strong general consensus among women in the focus-group discussions and the in-depth interviews that it was of little concern to them that their husbands had sex with prostitutes before marriage. Many women said that their husbands had admitted to such activity, either volunteering it or in response to direct questioning by the wife. In some cases, women had inquired before the marriage about their future husband's experience. More commonly the matter was only discussed after the couple was already married. The usual reaction of a wife learning of her husband's premarital commercial sex experience was that she had little right to condemn her husband for events that took place before the establishment of her own relationship with him.

Moderator: How do wives feel if they know that husbands took prostitutes before getting married?

Mrs N: I won't blame him... It's okay if it was before we are married. After the marriage, I ask him not to do it. We can't find an inexperienced husband nowadays. (Bangkok slum female group)

Mrs N1: I asked him (if he had been to prostitutes before) because I am curious about how they visit prostitutes? I asked him after we were married. I wanted to know what did they do and how? I'm curious.

Moderator: Mostly, how does one feel when asking men about this?

Mrs T: Nothing, it's funny. It's an enjoyable topic.

Mrs N2: It's a thing of the past. (Bangkok middle class female group)

Moderator: What would wives say if they learn that husbands took prostitutes before marrying them?

Mrs K: It's a normal practice.

---

'wrong or not wrong' (*pen karn kratham pit ru mai*) is different wording from that used in the lead questions for our focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews and thus is not directly comparable. However, it approximates our attempt to ask about whether such behaviour was appropriate (*mohsom*) as opposed to ordinary (*tamada*).

Mrs T: They shouldn't mind since he was single then.

Mrs U: It's their privacy. But if they are married to us ... (Laughed). (Lopburi rural female group)

## **Premarital non-commercial sex relations**

### ***General views***

There was almost universal agreement among the urban focus groups that it is now common in Thailand for unmarried couples to engage in sexual relations. This usually referred to couples who had some commitment to each other, often including the anticipation of marriage, especially on the woman's part. The rural focus groups were less emphatic that premarital sex apart from prostitutes was routine, although, like the urban groups, they generally agreed that the trend is in this direction. Most in-depth interview respondents who discussed the matter, even those in rural areas, felt premarital sex was now common. A number of both male and female focus-group participants volunteered that they had lived with their spouses before being married.

Moderator: Is it a normal practice to have sexual affairs before getting married?

Mr N: In the past, after the engagement, men and women rarely spent time together. Nowadays, they live together before getting married.

Mr S: They do it that way nowadays. Most do. (Bangkok male factory worker group)

Mrs N: I look at my relatives, most of them have had sexual relations before they got married.

Mrs W: We become lovers and then get married.

Mrs N: They must get married but they have premarital sex. (Bangkok slum female group)

Both focus-group participants and in-depth respondents believe that in the past premarital sex outside prostitution was uncommon and that even couples planning to wed did not engage in sex before their marriage.<sup>5</sup> They acknowledge this was the traditional way even if it is no longer honoured today. Indeed, many older focus-group participants pointed to the difference between the present situation and that of their own generation.

Mr L: I think it depends on the person's age. If they are under 30, I'm sure they have had sex before getting married, almost every couple. But if they are over 30, then they got married first. (Lopburi urban male group)

Respondent: Nowadays, unmarried couples stay together as a trial. If they feel displeased with each other, each goes their own way without any obligation. In my generation, if girls were holding hands with boys, they felt ill at ease, that they were not pure. Our future husbands-to-be might feel disgusted with us. (Case 3 Bangkok (Phetburi) female trader)

---

<sup>5</sup>This demands consideration of just what constitutes a marriage. Presumably most study informants have in mind a social rather than a legal definition, as marriage registration is far from universal even at present, and often undertaken long after the couple hold a marriage ceremony or live together in a state recognized by the community as marriage (Chayovan 1989). Clearly elopement and other forms of establishing a cohabiting union recognized as a marriage by the community but without a full marriage ceremony have been common in the past (see e.g. Riley 1972) but apparently the present situation of living together before marriage differs in the view of many Thais.

The perceived frequency of premarital cohabitation by our study informants is undoubtedly influenced by the urban emphasis in our sample. Some urban focus groups explicitly contrasted the urban and rural situations. However, premarital sex is probably on the rise even in rural areas. In an ethnographic study of two villages in the Northeast, Lyttleton (1995) suggests this is occurring as part of the emulation of city lifestyles. Villagers in his study saw motorcycles as playing an important role providing unmarried couples the ability to go off on their own. This point was elaborated in one of our rural focus groups.

Mr Y: Transportation is different. It used to be very difficult to go places... At one time, a woman would take her friends along. She wouldn't go alone with a man. Suppose you invite her to go out, she'll take her friend with you... But now we just ride on motorcycle together, there's no need to have a friend.

Moderator: Isn't there anything like that in former times?

Mr C: No, there isn't.

Mr T: You could hardly find that practice. (Lopburi rural male group)

In some focus groups, participants felt that more casual forms of premarital non-commercial sex were also common or increasing, especially among this new generation of adolescents. Undoubtedly some of these opinions are exaggerated, probably reflecting images from mass media and, unlike the views of living together before marriage, less based on their own experiences or personal observations. Nevertheless, the experiences of our male in-depth informants confirm that premarital non-commercial sex that does not lead to marriage is not unusual. The majority of both urban and rural male respondents indicated they had at least one such relationship and in many cases several sexual relationships with 'ordinary' women.<sup>6</sup>

Approval of premarital sexual relations as expressed in the focus-group discussions was mixed and, to the extent it was seen as acceptable, was mainly in reference to sexual relations among couples who were planning to marry. This distinction between sex undertaken as a prelude to marriage and sex in more casual relationships is crucial for many in their attitudes towards premarital sex. While only some of our study informants disapproved of premarital sex for couples under any circumstances, there was considerable consensus that more casual non-commercial premarital sexual relationships were improper.

Moderator: Suppose a man and a woman live with each other and they aren't married yet, but they have sexual relations. Is it common?

Mrs W: It's normal if they love each other.

Mrs C1: It's okay, but they must have plans to get married, not just live together like that and then separate again.

Mrs C2: If they love each other and they have a plan to get married then it's all right. (Bangkok female factory worker group)

Interviewer: Do you take it as suitable (if boyfriends and girlfriends have affairs)?

Respondent: No. They have to propose if they mean to marry us. They may just want to seduce those girls.

Interviewer: Suppose they mean to marry them later?

---

<sup>6</sup>Since the original purpose of our project was to investigate male extramarital sexual behaviour, we did not ask women in-depth survey respondents about their sexual histories.

Respondent: If they really mean to, it's okay. (Case 15 Lopburi rural woman)

Respondent: If the two of them are going to get married with each other, that's OK (to have sex), there's no problem about that... But the man has to really love the woman and must be sure. He shouldn't leave her after he gets her. (Case 20 Lopburi urban man)

A 1993 survey found that high percentages of respondents (61% of men and 73% of women) indicated it was wrong for a single woman to have sex with a man but there was less disapproval of single men having sex with a non-commercial partner (44% of men and 55% of women). Given the distinction made by our study informants about the acceptability of committed rather than more casual premarital sexual relationships, it is difficult to interpret these results since the questions did not specify the type of non-commercial relationship (Thongthai and Guest 1995). The findings suggest, however, that attitudes towards premarital non-commercial sex incorporate somewhat of a double standard. This was also evident in our qualitative study and appears to derive from the very different views of male and female sexuality described above.

For men, premarital non-commercial sex relations are viewed as being to their advantage since men have little to lose. Seeking sex was sometimes seen as either the dominant motive or as a very prominent one for many men in their relations with women. In contrast, women were rarely cited as seeking sex for its own sake with men. Instead, women needed to be on their guard against men who would take advantage of them. Unlike men, women who succumbed to premarital sex, especially if not engaged, risked social disapproval. This in part reflects the traditional value placed on female virginity before marriage. By having sexual relations with a boyfriend before a commitment is made, a woman risks weakening her position in negotiating marriage with him.

Moderator: Is it appropriate for boys and girls to have sexual intercourse before getting married?

Mrs N1: Women and their parents are at a disadvantage.

Mrs N2: If we let it happen before the marriage, they might give us up and find someone else... Most men aim at taking women before the marriage. Women don't want to since we are at disadvantage. We would like to be a virgin until the wedding day. We want them to be proud of us. However, most men want to have us before the appointed date. (Bangkok slum female group)

Mr N: Women might say no (to premarital sex). However, it's always all right for men since we aim at taking them from the beginning.

Mr D: Men have the advantage... We know we like them and if we do, we'll try to sleep with them... Whoever we court, we want to sleep with.

Mr C: Our aim is for sexual pleasure... It's against the local tradition, for women to be taken by men before marriage. They feel ashamed and are afraid of being blamed as being promiscuous. (Bangkok slum male group)

### ***Importance of female virginity***

Interestingly, being a virgin was never spontaneously mentioned when we asked focus-group participants what men sought in a wife. However, when asked directly, men's groups generally agreed that men prefer to marry a virgin. At the same time, many indicated that virginity was not one of the most important concerns in selecting a wife.

Moderator: Why is it important that you get virgins?

Mr S: Everybody wants to be the lead warrior, to be the first. We don't want to follow anybody. But if that is not possible and you have to be second, you can accept it. You don't have to think too much.

Mr L: I don't think it's important. You may get a virgin but you (can still) have family problems. You might have to divorce... Okay, you're proud to get a virgin but in the future this virgin could cause problems... You have to understand each other. (Lopburi urban male group)

Opinions were quite mixed about the extent to which men were concerned about a potential wife's prior sexual relationships. Sometimes the issue was expressed in terms of pride about being the first to have sex with one's wife. Other comments were linked to concerns about being sure either that the prior relationships would not resume or that they were not indicative of possible future infidelities with other men. Distinctions were sometimes made between women who had a prior marriage and those who had affairs while single, possibly because the latter held greater significance as an indicator of how prone the woman might be to fidelity after marriage.

Mr P: If she separated from her husband and then we like her and she liked us, that's one thing. But if we know that she had somebody before as a lover and she's not married, she had other men, one here and one there, well I've got to think perhaps I shouldn't have taken the leftover from other men. Men consider that she is experienced even though she has ended the earlier relationships. (Lopburi urban male group)

On balance, the Thai husbands in our study are fairly tolerant of women who have had premarital sexual relations as candidates for spouses. Though many articulate their preference for virgin wives, they do not necessarily condemn wives for prior sexual relations, and would not consider the discovery of a wife's premarital sexual history to be grounds to prevent or terminate a marital union. The lack of importance given to female virginity by men in our study may, however, reflect the largely urban nature of our sample. Participants in the two rural male focus groups expressed more concern about virginity than men generally did in our urban groups. Other researchers have also found considerable concern about virginity among rural men, noting that a woman's premarital sexual history can lead to marital conflict (Im-Em 1996).

### *Views of husband's prior relationships*

Although women did not express negative views about marrying a virgin man, for most it seemed pointless to contemplate this. Indeed, many accepted the double standard implicit in the belief that men needed sexual experience before getting married. This was evident in their tolerance of husbands' prior visits to prostitutes. Women were also generally accepting of premarital non-commercial sexual relationships that their husbands might have had, although typically they expressed greater concern about prior affairs than about premarital patronage of prostitutes. Women's main interest in this connection was getting assurance that any earlier relationships were ended and would not resume.

Respondent: (My wife and I) have talked. She asked me how many women I had (before we were married). I told her six. She did not say anything because it was before our marriage. She was only interested in women other than service girls because she was afraid that I would meet them again and have affairs. (Case 17 Lopburi rural male)

Moderator: What will wives feel if they know that their husbands had sex with some other girlfriends before marrying them?

Mrs. K: It might be okay as long as they didn't go on with that affair... It was in the past, wasn't it? If he didn't continue the affair, it wouldn't matter.

Mrs. T: We come later so we have to let it be. (Lopburi rural female group)

### **The importance of sex in marriage**

When focus-group participants were asked what characteristics men and women seek in a spouse, the most common answer, typically mentioned spontaneously, is that both men and women want someone who understands and gets along with them. In all groups, women said that a good husband was one who earns and provides support for the family. Both men and women participants believe a good wife is one who is able to care for and provide emotional support not only to the husband but especially the children. In other words, a wife should be a good housekeeper and mother.

Sexual compatibility was never spontaneously mentioned by either men or women as an important characteristic of a good spouse. When the issue was explicitly brought up by the moderator, diverse opinions were expressed. Some participants felt that sex was a crucial aspect of the marital relationship while others saw it as only secondary or as an aspect that loses its significance after an initial period. This was true in both men's and women's focus groups, although men were more likely to state that sex played an important role in marriage. Furthermore, although married male respondents sometimes brought up the centrality of sex in their lives, poor marital sex seemed only rarely to be considered as grounds for proclaiming an unhappy or unsatisfied union.

Moderator: Do you think sexual life is important to husbands and wives?

Mr. N: Both husbands and wives need it. If we don't agree on it, we can't be together.

Mr. P: If we don't want it, we can become monks.

Mr. N: If we have all we need but have no sexual drive, we may have problems. If wives want it and we don't, they may feel desperate. If we want it and wives don't, we can't stand it either. (Bangkok factory men)

Mr. B: Marriage and sex life go together. It's natural but sex life is not the top priority... It's like adding spice to the meal. (Bangkok middle class male group)

Mr. T: I don't think that sexual life is an important factor. Most Thai people get divorced because of other factors. As for sex, Thai husbands and wives can compromise. (Kanchanaburi urban male group)

If the importance of sex in marriage declines over time as several of our informants mentioned and as statistics on coital frequency would seem to suggest (Knodel and Chayovan 1991), the importance assigned to sexual compatibility in our results could be influenced by the fact that most of our focus-group participants and in-depth survey respondents were married for at least several years. Nevertheless, other observers of the Thai family have noted that the sexual relationship between husband and wife is usually considered as subordinate to other issues, especially the socio-economic functions of marriage (ten Brummelhuis 1993). Moreover, a recent small-scale survey of a purposive (apparently urban) sample of married couples from five different social strata found that, except for white-collar couples, only a minority of respondents agreed with the statement that to be a good wife, a woman should not only be good at housework but also be good in bed (Tangchonlatip 1995). Contrary to the impression gained from our qualitative data, men were even more likely to disagree than women.

One relatively consistent pattern to emerge was that women focus-group participants discussed marital sex primarily from the husband's perspective rather than from their own. This occurred in several ways. Perhaps most generally, the need for sex was seen as being more innate and intense for men than for women, so naturally the emphasis of marital sex should be on providing the husband with an outlet for his sexual drive. Rarely did women say that sexual satisfaction was important for themselves.

Mrs S: Men are more sexually experienced than most women so they take it as a priority. To earn the living is second to sexual life. (Laughed) For women, children must be properly fed and clothed and sexual life is second to children's welfare. (Lopburi rural female group)

Moderator: What about 'Bed business' (in marriage)?

Mrs N: They all think about it.

Mrs L: Yes, men do.

Mrs N: They look at it as natural. We also do but for them it is innate. (Bangkok slum female group)

In virtually all the women's focus groups and in many of the in-depth interviews, women expressed the view that it was important for wives to please their husbands sexually. This was seen as important for discouraging husbands from seeking sex elsewhere. Indeed, given the perception of an innate male need for sex, not providing sexual satisfaction for the husband is seen by many women as risking his infidelity. Consistent with this view as expressed by our study informants, results from a small-scale survey indicated that the majority of respondents, and especially women, agreed that if wives could please husbands as skilfully as prostitutes, then husbands would not patronize commercial sex (Tangchonlatip 1995).

Interviewer: Do wives have to be good in bed?

Respondent: Yes. Husbands would look for some others if they are not sexually satisfied with wives. Men can't live without it but women can. (Case 06 Bangkok female clerk)

Moderator: Between husband-wife, do you think that sexuality is important?

Mrs T: As I listen to the others and from my own experiences, sometimes it's quite important for a family, because some men need it and if his wife can't give it to him, he then must go out and seek it elsewhere. (Bangkok middle class female group)

Occasionally, men stated that they were concerned about pleasing their wives sexually, but this was far less common than women's expressed concerns about pleasing their husbands. In general, in views about the need for sex both before and after marriage, there is a clear difference in the extent to which sex is considered important to men and women.

### **Extramarital patronage of prostitutes**

The degree of social acceptance for patronage of prostitutes by married men is quite varied and often conditional on it being only occasional. There are also clearer differences between the views of men and women on this matter. Many married men consider occasional excursions to prostitutes to be ordinary and even acceptable under certain circumstances. Indeed, among the 21 men with whom we conducted in-depth interviews, 11 admitted having had sex with a prostitute since marriage and seven apparently continue to do so. Both the focus-group discussions and the in-depth interviews reveal quite mixed views among our male informants about visits to prostitutes after marriage. Some men are completely opposed

and only a few condone such behaviour without qualifications. Given that many Thai men see variation in sexual partners as an important part of their sexual lives, some amount of patronage of prostitutes after marriage is perceived as normal by most men.

Moderator: Let me ask you whether it is acceptable for Thai married men to visit prostitutes?

Mr E: As for men, it's acceptable.

Mr B: To me, those who don't visit a prostitute are abnormal.

Mr T: They are hen-pecked or something like this. (Bangkok middle class male group)

Moderator: Do you think it's a ordinary practice for married men to take prostitutes?

Mr R: It might be if they do it once in a while...

Mr N1: For men, there must be times like that occasionally.

Mr N2: As men, we can't stay home all the time. We need different flavours. Friends may say we are afraid of wives if we don't go with them anywhere. (Bangkok male factory worker group)

Respondent: I think that depends on an individual. Some still go (visit prostitutes) even though they are married with a wife already. They feel they don't have enough. It's like they need a change of taste. (Case 37 Kanchanaburi rural male)

Numerous male respondents in the in-depth interviews stated that infrequent patronage was acceptable as long as family needs were not neglected. Some also mentioned the need to protect oneself (and thus one's family) from STDs. However, both the focus-group discussions and the in-depth interviews illustrate that a substantial proportion of our male informants view frequent visits to prostitutes by a married man as excessive and disapprove of it, especially if it leads to abrogation of family responsibilities.

Respondent: Going frequently is not proper. But if they (married men) go only once in a while and protect themselves from diseases by using condoms, it is all right. (Case 18 Lopburi rural male)

Married women have a less tolerant attitude than their husbands towards married men visiting prostitutes. Some view even occasional visits as totally unacceptable. In our focus groups, and undoubtedly in the general public, the majority of married Thai women clearly prefer their husbands not to visit prostitutes at all.

Mrs S: Hundred per cent, women don't like it (married men visiting prostitutes).

Several: We don't like it.

Mrs S: But sometimes we can't forbid it since men think it's ordinary. (Bangkok middle class female group)

Respondent: I don't see why married men have to (visit prostitutes) since they already have families. Women surely don't like it if their husbands do that... They shouldn't do it at all, especially now when there are a lot of diseases... If they think they can't live with only one woman, I mean a wife, they shouldn't get married in the first place. (Case 4 Bangkok female middle class)

Despite their dislike of the practice, some women accept the view that men have a natural need for sexual variety and thus reluctantly tolerate occasional patronage of prostitutes by their husbands. For them, and indeed for many Thai men, it is seen as a form of male entertainment and not as a serious breach of marital trust. Just over two-fifths of the

women in-depth respondents (compared to about two-thirds of the men) felt that visiting prostitutes after marriage was ordinary behaviour. This does not mean they approved of it or thought it was proper but rather that they saw it as a 'fact of life'. Moreover, wives' tolerance was typically conditioned on the husbands' visits to prostitutes being discreet and infrequent, precautions being taken against STDs, and the costs not draining the family finances.

Respondent: It seems to be an outlet and a kind of entertainment among men. They do it in groups of friends if urged by each other. (Case 21 Lopburi urban female)

Respondent: They give us most of the money so we must sometimes let them stray... Not as a habit. They are allowed to (visit prostitutes) once in a while... if we are not financially troubled. (Case 2 Bangkok female teacher)

Interviewer: Is it normal for married men to take prostitutes?

Respondent: It's okay for me if they do it now and then or on some special occasions. If they do it as a habit, they are irresponsible and they may get wives infected through them. (Case 22 Lopburi urban female).

Some women, who indicate that they are opposed to their husbands having sex relations outside the marital union, make exceptions to their general opposition during times when they are unable to have sexual intercourse with their husbands for an extended time. They see their husbands having an innate need of frequent release of sexual drive and thus view situations where they themselves cannot meet this need as justifying an occasional visit to a prostitute. Such situations include long periods of marital abstinence necessitated by pregnancy and recent childbirth. It might also include situations where employment requires the couple to be separated for long periods.

Mrs K: There's one period of time, during a wife's pregnancy, when a man wants to go out (and see prostitutes).

Mrs P: That's normal.

Mrs M: Yes, it's normal.

Mrs T: There's no one to release his desire. (Kanchanaburi urban female group)

Mrs R: If I cannot give him happiness (sleep with him), I would let him do it with prostitutes occasionally, but he has to protect himself. (Kanchanaburi rural female group)

Family responsibilities are often cited as reasons for opposing men's use of commercial sex, especially if frequent. It is nevertheless possible for some women to reconcile a husband's occasional visits to prostitutes and his obligations to his family. Thus tolerance, among those women who reluctantly accept the practice, is contingent on men not squandering more than they can afford and taking precautions against STDs.

### **Extramarital sexual affairs**

While visiting prostitutes by men is often seen as a means of entertainment and thus not as a serious act of infidelity, entering a sexual relation with an ordinary (non-commercial) partner is viewed quite gravely. This is so whether the offending spouse is the husband or the wife. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference in overall views towards male and female infidelity.

#### ***Female infidelity***

Views on women's extramarital sexual activity are unambiguous. Both male and female focus-group participants and in-depth survey respondents typically saw female infidelity as unacceptable and assumed that it would lead to the termination of the marriage by the man. Indeed it could also lead the husband to violence, against the wife, the lover, or both.

Moderator: Is it common for women to have other men?

Mr S: Men just can't accept that. If the woman does that, it means we have to separate... Our society just can't accept this kind of behaviour in women... Men consider themselves as tigers. Two tigers can't live in the same cave. One must die. (Lopburi urban male group)

Moderator: Can you stand the idea of your wives sleeping with other men?

Mr S: It's a big, troublesome deal then. (Laughed) They shoot each other because of this. (Bangkok male factory worker group)

Respondent: If they do that (extramarital sexual relations), they are bad women. This is forbidden. They can be killed by their husbands. (Case 17 Lopburi rural male)

The total unacceptability of female infidelity was often explicitly contrasted with the more lenient attitudes towards male indulgence in extramarital sex. Unlike men, women are expected to control their sexuality and devote themselves solely to their husbands and their families.

Respondent: It is common for men to sleep with women other than their wives. But as for women, if they have affairs, it is unacceptable... Such behaviour of women is against Thai culture. But as for men, it is common. The only thing that women have to keep in mind is that they have to take good care of the family, make their family happy. (Case 28 Lopburi urban male)

Respondent: Men are men and women are women. Women are supposed to behave... If women take lovers as a revenge to husbands, they will never have them back... It's the most serious damage a married woman can do to her family. (Case 21 Lopburi urban female)

Mrs M: People in all societies are like that. If women are unfaithful to husbands, they will be left... But if men are unfaithful, wives will try to solve the problem. (Lopburi urban female group)

There were occasional mentions, especially by women, of situations where it is understandable, if not socially acceptable, for a woman to seek or accept a sexual relationship with some man other than her husband. Such circumstances typically involved a husband who was irresponsible or abusive towards his wife and family. Other reasons for infidelity were also stated, such as boredom or bad character on the part of the woman, but received little or no sympathy from our study informants.

The virtually universal disapproval and strong condemnation of extramarital affairs by women does not mean they are non-existent. In at least one in-depth interview, a male respondent tearfully confided his wife's infidelity. Moreover, in a number of the focus-group discussions, local examples were cited. Everyone agreed, however, that these are exceptional cases. Survey evidence is sparse on the subject, but to the extent it exists indicates that almost no women admit to such behaviour (e.g. Sittitrai et al. 1992). Married men's extramarital sexual affairs with women other than prostitutes are another matter.

### ***Male infidelity***

In Thailand non-commercial sexual relationships in which men involve themselves are quite varied, ranging from casual encounters to committed relationships. While there is a lack of

reliable population-based estimates of the prevalence of extramarital non-commercial sex for Thai men, there is some quantitative and qualitative research which suggests that it is not uncommon (Havanon, Bennett and Knodel 1992; VanLandingham et al. 1995).<sup>7</sup> Even if not paid directly, most non-commercial sex partners of married Thai men will expect some material benefit in the form of gifts, occasional loans, or outright total support from their male partners, depending upon the nature of the relationship with the married man. Men who enter these relationships typically understand these expectations. Furthermore, so do their wives. In the extreme case where a non-commercial sex partner is fully supported by a married male, she is usually referred to as a minor wife by both parties.

Mr S: A minor wife is known to the society. People know her. The legal wife also knows about her... You have to be responsible for them the same way you are for the legal wives. (Lopburi urban male group)

Moderator: Who are minor wives then?

Mrs M: Those who are financially supported by our husbands. They may have children by them.

Mrs T: We have to share the income with them.

Mrs M: We don't have as much as we used to have. They are treated just like wives since they share everything with us. (Lopburi, urban women)

Minor wives and concubines have apparently been common in Thailand among the upper strata for centuries (Wilson and Henley 1994). Moreover, as our study informants acknowledge, they are clearly still a salient threat to modern married women. Probably because minor wives have potentially greater economic and emotional significance for the husband-wife relationship, this category of non-commercial sex received more attention in the focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews than did other types of non-commercial sex partners. In reality, most non-commercial sexual relationships of married men probably are of a less committed nature than that with a minor wife. However, wives also see such more casual relationships as threatening to family security, both in their own right and because they might eventually lead to a more demanding minor-wife-type relationship. With few exceptions, women in our study viewed relationships with minor wives, or women who could potentially have a long-term affair with their husbands, as either intolerable or as an extremely difficult burden to bear.

Mrs S: There is an old saying that it is better to lose gold equal to the weight of one's head than to lose a husband. Minor wives cause family problems. Husbands should not take them if they do not want to quarrel with their wife. (Lopburi rural female group)

Interviewer: What would you do if your husband had an affair?

Respondent: Those (women) who have such problems must think about their children. Men tend to be selfish and they are likely to keep both women. Most middle-class wives can't do much without husbands' support so they have to stand the situation. Then, they

---

<sup>7</sup>Such data are undoubtedly very difficult to ascertain accurately in a broad-based survey. Available estimates of men recently (in the last six or twelve months) having sex with non-commercial sexual partners range from 5 to 28 per cent (Sittitrai et al. 1992; VanLandingham et al. 1993; Thongthai and Guest 1995). Even less information is available on the types and characteristics of the women who are non-commercial sexual partners of married men or why they enter such relationships (see, however, Havanon et al. 1992). It seems likely that in most cases such women are not married themselves, being either single or formerly married, but reliable statistics are lacking.

get used to it. For those who don't have a financial problem, they may get a divorce since the wives can provide for their children. (Case 6 Bangkok female clerk)

Moderator: And if he doesn't really intend to take her as a minor wife but just sees her from time to time?

Mrs N: Even if he doesn't think about it, we women have to think about it. We're afraid he might take it seriously. (Bangkok slum female group)

Except for the most casual affairs, even non-commercial relationships that do not reach the minor-wife stage will normally last much longer than commercial contacts. Thus wives typically feel far more threatened by ordinary women who engage sexually with their husbands than by prostitutes, who require neither extensive emotional nor resource commitment. The predominant opinion expressed in the focus-group discussion with both men and women was that non-commercial affairs were worse than patronage of prostitutes. Similar opinions were expressed by women in the in-depth interviews although concerns about the risk of AIDS from prostitutes was also very prominent among them, sometimes tipping the balance in the opposite direction.

Mrs R: To go out (to visit prostitutes) is better (than taking a minor wife). I think it's better to be temporary and it can be finished. In a case of a minor wife, he must be responsible for her. In fact, he would have to divide with her the money that he would provide me. Instead of the family being completely supported, we have to divide into two instead of receiving the whole amount. (Kanchanaburi urban female group)

Respondent: For me, I won't stand it if my husband has affairs. As for prostitutes, if he takes them from time to time, it's okay. They do it as a job. If he has affairs with some ordinary girl, he must be really fond of her. It means that he doesn't care for me any longer. (Laughed) I won't stand for it. (Case 22 Lopburi urban female)

Interviewer: Would women consider men's taking prostitutes differently if there were no AIDS?

Respondent: It might be all right. If he was bored with me, he could take one.

Interviewer: Could he take mistresses?

Respondent: No, absolutely not. He would spend all on her and I and my children would be in trouble. He would waste all, money and time. (Case 32 Kanchanaburi rural female)

Married women's reluctant tolerance of their husband's visits to prostitutes must be understood within this context. Thai wives are less threatened by their husbands' occasional visit to a prostitute than by their taking up with an ordinary woman, as a girl-friend or, even worse, as a minor wife. Non-commercial sex partners of any sort, and minor wives in particular, are seen as threatening the very core of family because they represent potential resource reallocation from wife and children to other recipients outside the present family; so it is not surprising that occasional visits to prostitutes are tolerated. Some women even seem to adopt a conscious strategy of permitting commercial sex visits in order to prevent the greater threat posed by non-commercial affairs. Given the Thai view of male sexuality, which includes the need for variety, some infidelity seems likely if not inevitable. Permitting visits to prostitutes means this need can be met without risk of serious resource loss to the family.

Respondent: Some wives believe it's better than taking mistresses. I hate both, either prostitutes or mistresses. Some wives are forced to take the idea of husbands taking prostitutes as better. (Case 19 Lopburi urban woman)

Mrs N: I can accept when my husband visits prostitutes but he must protect himself. It's better to let him go and pay his money than having another woman as a regular partner. I

accept it when he goes out, I told him to pay in return and not to do it for free, because free of charge might cause a constant attachment... That will hurt us if he has someone else and he keeps supporting her. Let him go out if he wants a change of taste. (Bangkok middle class female group)

Mr B: I got this idea from my wife. After I got married, she asked me not to have a minor wife but she allowed me to visit prostitutes. When you visit a prostitute, you pay for her and that's it. But if you have a minor wife, you have to keep paying or giving her money. If my wife doesn't allow me to visit a prostitute, I must have a minor wife. It's natural for a man to feel bored, so he has to look for something new. (Bangkok middle class male group)

Frequent patronage of commercial sex, however, is also seen as unacceptable by women (and many men), for it also drains familial resources and heightens the risk of bringing disease to the family. At the same time, non-commercial sex of any sort, especially serious girl-friends and minor wives, is universally regarded as unacceptable by married women. It is typically when familial resources are in question that wives object most strongly to husbands' extramarital affairs.

## **Conclusions**

Current views of Thai sexuality are linked with the social construction of gender, which is itself but one component of a broader system of social relations and expectations between men and women in Thai society. While it is important to recognize that there is much diversity in views among individuals, there are still reasonably distinctive patterns that have emerged from the focus-group discussions and individual in-depth interviews with married men and women.

There is a clear consensus among Thais that sex is more important for men than for women and that men by nature have a need for sex that requires frequent outlet. Also, in the view of many, men need some variety in sexual partners. Our informants often stated that men become bored if limited to a monogamous relationship and that a desire for an occasional break from one's steady partner is a natural inclination for men. The premarital and extramarital commercial sex patronage by many Thai men is consistent with these general views of both our married male and female informants. In contrast, women are thought to be far more in control of their sexual desires, which are in any event far less intense than those of men. There was also no expression of a need for variety as part of female sexuality. Instead, many women viewed their own sexuality as a means for providing satisfaction for their husbands' needs.

Both men and women, but particularly women, perceived that male sexual satisfaction was a necessary (if not sufficient) element in a successful monogamous union. The responsibility of a wife to please her husband in sexual relations was seen by some women as part a strategy to accommodate men's stronger sexual needs and thus reduce the risk of husbands seeking alternative outlets that might threaten the security of the marriage. At the same time, in the discussions of what makes a good spouse, satisfactory sex was generally seen by both men and women as secondary in importance to more general personal compatibility, mutual understanding, and fulfilment of complementary responsibilities as defined by the culturally embedded gender system.

Clearly, married women dislike all forms of male infidelity, but the social construction of male sexuality in Thailand conditions the degree to which women and men view various forms of male extramarital relations as threats to their marriages. Occasional commercial sex patronage was generally not seen as an act of marital betrayal by either the men or the women, though many of the women were concerned by the threats posed by AIDS and other

STDs. Both men and women also noted that excessive commercial sex patronage could result in financial hardships and marital conflict for the man's family. These qualifications are essentially pragmatic concerns rather than moralistic or ethical ones. This is in sharp contrast to prevailing views in most Western societies, where commercial sex patronage by a husband is likely to be viewed as a serious breach of marital trust and could be potentially devastating to couples.

The differing social constructions of male and female sexuality also form the basis for a prevalent double standard in Thai society with regard to sexual behaviour. It is permissible for single men to seek sexual release with prostitutes. The idea of single women paying for sex is probably unimaginable and the idea simply never arose in any group discussion or in-depth interview. Some tolerance exists for a single woman to have sex with her regular male partner, especially if the couple is committed to eventual marriage. More casual non-commercial sexual relationships are less tolerated but the shame associated with them is mainly directed towards the woman. Loss of virginity for a woman is seen as detracting from her attractiveness as a potential wife for another suitor, although for many urban men in our study this is a secondary concern. Virginity for single men is considered an oddity and thus not expected as a characteristic for a future husband.

The double standard is pronounced with respect to marital fidelity. There is virtually uniform strong condemnation by both men and women of married women who are unfaithful to their husbands unless there are extraordinary mitigating circumstances. In contrast, men are quite tolerant of occasional extramarital commercial sex outings as long as they are infrequent and discreet. Also some Thai wives are reluctantly willing to tolerate an occasional visit by their husbands to prostitutes. This stems from a perception that men need some sexual variety and that in the male quest to fulfil this need, visiting prostitutes can serve as an alternative to involvement with a non-commercial partner that might drain emotional and material resources from the current marriage.

The overall impression provided by our study informants is that children are considered a more central focus of marriage than the sexual and emotional intimacy of the conjugal bond. Thus it is not surprising that the financial threats posed by husbands' non-commercial sex partners were the most feared aspects of male infidelity for married Thai women. This is not to argue that affairs between married Thai men and non-commercial partners have no emotional effect on the men's wives or that male infidelity does not engender a sense of emotional betrayal. Some Thai couples undoubtedly share much emotional intimacy within their marriage. Moreover, if the husband is indiscreet in either his patronage of prostitutes or affairs with non-commercial partners, the wife will lose face. But general expectations that Thai men have 'natural' needs for sexual variety temper the degree to which Thai women take these extramarital liaisons as a sign of personal rejection, especially when they only involve occasional relations with prostitutes in the course of male entertainment activities.

Thai patterns of sexual behaviour are currently in flux. More companionate forms of marriage are probably becoming popular among Western-educated urban elites and eventually may diffuse to the more general population. More dramatically, the AIDS epidemic is undoubtedly serving to make longstanding patterns of male sexual behaviour more costly and less common. Future patterns of Thai sexual behaviour and views of gender and sexuality, however, will necessarily be based on those that prevail at present. Thus gaining an accurate view of current Thai perceptions is an essential step for mapping changes that either are induced by programmatic interventions or come about from less deliberate forces set in motion by the epidemic and the changing socio-economic context in which it is occurring. As the present study shows, the systematic collection of qualitative data by the use of focus groups and focused in-depth interviews can contribute significantly to the expanding

base of knowledge on matters that only a decade ago were almost completely absent from the social science research agenda.

## References

- Bamber S. D., K. J. Hewison and P. J. Underwood. 1993. A history of sexually transmitted diseases in Thailand: policy and politics. *Genitourinary Medicine* 69:148-157.
- Boonchalaksi, Wathinee and Philip Guest. 1994. *Prostitution in Thailand*. Nakhorn Pathom: Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University.
- Brown, Tim, Werastit Sittitrai, Suphak Vanichseni and Usa Thisyakorn. 1994. The recent epidemiology of HIV and AIDS in Thailand. *AIDS* 8(Supplement 2):S131-S141.
- Chayovan, Napaporn. 1989. Marriage registration among Thai women. Pp. 205-221 in *Health and Population Studies Based On the 1987 Thailand Demographic and Health Survey*. Demographic and Health Surveys Further Analysis Series, No. 1. New York: Population Council and Institute for Resource Development.
- Deemar Company. 1990. *AIDS Research in Thailand, Vol. I: Computer Tabulations*. Bangkok.
- Frankfort-Nachmias, Chava and David Nachmias. 1992. *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. Fourth edition. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fordham, Graham. 1995. The ritual constitution of maleness amongst the northern Thai. Paper presented at Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand conference, Australian National University, 11-12 July.
- Havanon, Napaporn, Anthony Bennett and John Knodel. 1992. Sexual networking in a provincial Thai setting. AIDS Prevention Monograph Series Paper No. 1, Family Health International, Bangkok.
- Im-Em, Wassana. 1996. Partner relations and AIDS in Chiang Mai villages. Ph.D thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Keyes, Charles. 1986. Ambiguous gender: male initiation in a northern Thai Buddhist society. In *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. C. W. Bynum, S. Harrell and P. Richman. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Knodel John. 1993a. Prostitution in (historical) perspective. *Bangkok Post* 30 June.
- Knodel, John. 1993b. The design and analysis of focus group studies in social science research. Pp. 35-50 in *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*, ed. D. Morgan. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Knodel, John and Napaporn Chayovan. 1991. Coital activity among married Thai women. Pp. 925-945 in *The Demographic and Health Surveys World Conference, Proceedings*, Vol. 2.
- London, Andrew, Mark VanLandingham and Nancy Grandjean. 1995. Homosexual behaviour among northern Thai males: measures, prevalence and cofactors. Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Washington DC.
- Lyttleton, Chris. 1995. Changing the rules: shifting bounds of adolescent sexuality in rural Isan. Paper presented at Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand conference, Australian National University, 11-12 July.
- Morgan, David. 1996. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Riley, James Nelson. 1972. Family organization and population dynamics in a central Thai village. Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina.
- Rojanapithayakorn, Wiwat and Robert Hanenberg. 1996. The 100% Condom Program in Thailand. *AIDS* 10:1-7.

- Seidel, John, Susanne Friese and D. Christopher Leonard. 1995. *The Ethnograph v4.0: A Users Manual*. Amherst: Qualis Research.
- Sittitrai, Werasit, Praphan Phanuphak, Jean Barry and Tim Brown. 1992. *Thai Sexual Behaviour and the Risk of HIV Infection: A Report of the 1990 Survey of Partner Relations and Risk of HIV Infection in Thailand*. Bangkok: Program on AIDS, Thai Red Cross Society and Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University.
- Tangchonlatip, Kanchana. 1995. Sexual expectations of Thai married couples. Paper presented at Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand conference, Australian National University, 11-12 July.
- ten Brummelhuis, Han. 1993. Do we need a Thai theory of prostitution? Paper presented at 5th International Conference on Thai Studies, School of Oriental and Asian Studies, London, 5-10 July.
- Thailand, National Statistical Office. No date. Nuptiality of Thai Population 1990 Population and Housing Census, Subject Report No. 4. Bangkok.
- Thongthai, Varachai and Philip Guest. 1995. Thai sexual attitudes and behaviour: results from a recent national survey. Paper presented at Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand conference, Australian National University, 11-12 July.
- VanLandingham, Mark, Somboon Suprasert, Werasit Sittitrai, Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Nancy Grandjean. 1993. Sexual activity among never-married men in Northern Thailand. *Demography* 30,3:297-313.
- VanLandingham, Mark, John Knodel, Anthony Pramualratana and Chanpen Saengtienchai. 1995. *Friends, Wives and Extramarital Sex in Thailand*. Institute of Population Studies Publication No. 222/95. Bangkok: Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University.
- Wilson, Donald and David Henley. 1994. Prostitution: facing the facts. *Sunday (Bangkok) Post* 25 December.