“Rice Is Essential but Tiresome; You Should Get Some Noodles”: Doi Moi and the Political Economy of Men’s Extramarital Sexual Relations and Marital HIV Risk in Hanoi, Vietnam

Harriet M. Phinney, PhD, MPH

Ethnographic and epidemiological research from around the world has suggested that married women’s greatest risk for contracting HIV is from having sexual intercourse with their husbands. On the basis of 6 months of ethnographic research in Hanoi, Vietnam, I argue that the contemporary nature of the HIV epidemic in Hanoi is shaped by 3 interrelated policies implemented in 1986 as part of the government’s new economic policy, Doi Moi (Renovation). Together, these policies structure men’s opportunities for extramarital sexual relations and encourage wives to acquiesce to their husbands’ sexual infidelity, putting both at risk of HIV. I propose 4 structural intervention strategies that address the policies that contribute to men’s opportunities for extramarital liaisons and to marital HIV risk. (Am J Public Health. 2008; 98:650–660. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2007.111534)

I argue that the contemporary nature of the HIV epidemic in Hanoi has been shaped by 3 interrelated policies implemented by the Vietnamese government as part of Doi Moi: (1) the decision to shift from a socialist economy to a market-oriented economy, (2) the Happy Family campaign, and (3) a lessening of direct governmental control over population movement, the urban environment, and moral issues. My focus is not on the policies per se, but on the way in which they have shaped men’s opportunities for extramarital sexual relations in Hanoi and how they have informed men’s efforts to be modern. After elucidating the interaction between policy and individual behavior as it pertains to men’s sexuality, I propose 4 strategies for reducing marital HIV transmission in Hanoi, each of which addresses the policies that shape men’s opportunities for extramarital sexual relations and their wives’ acquiescence to such infidelities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research I report was part of a National Institutes of Health–funded study, Love, Marriage and HIV: A Multi-site Study of Gender and HIV. It was designed to produce qualitative ethnographic data comparable across 5 country field sites: Uganda, Nigeria, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam. The principal goal of the study was to understand how men contribute to marital HIV risk.

The Vietnamese data came from ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the majority ethnic group in Hanoi, the Kinh, from February through July 2004. I carried out the research in collaboration with Nguyen Huu Minh, the vice-director of the Institute of Sociology (IOS) at the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences in Hanoi. The fieldwork
consisted of 4 parts: marital case studies, key informant interviews, participant observation, and archival data collection. All respondents agreed to participate in the study after reading the institutional review board–approved protocols for informed consent. A researcher from IOS was hired to transcribe recorded interviews.

Two male and 3 female researchers from IOS were hired to conduct 23 marital case studies (23 husbands and 23 wives). We also interviewed 8 individuals whose spouses did not participate in the study.9 The purpose of the marital case studies was to explore issues regarding courtship, early marriage, marital communication, decision-making, child rearing, dispute resolution, changes in spousal relationship over time, marital sexuality, extramarital sexual relations, and understanding and experience with HIV/AIDS. Participants were identified using the snowball method and chosen according to a sampling matrix that tracked variation in 3 characteristics: marital duration, husband’s occupation, and husband’s mobility and migration experience.

Male respondents were aged between 28 and 66 years and were recently married with a child younger than 5 years, married with children living in the house, or grandfathers. Husbands’ occupations included but were not limited to xe om (motorcycle taxi) drivers, printers, engineers, electricians, coffee roasters, doctors, beer sellers, lottery ticket salesmen, factory workers, high school teachers, contractors, lawyers, and bookkeepers. Interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the interviewee, typically in a cafe or at home, in 1 or 2 sessions. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately by male and female researchers, respectively.

I also conducted interviews with 15 key informants who had specialized knowledge on subjects pertinent to the study. Interviews typically took place at their work sites. Table 1 delineates the individuals we interviewed, their occupation, their gender, and the subject matter about which we spoke.

Occasionally accompanied by members of the IOS research team, I conducted participant observation throughout the 6 months of fieldwork. Participant observation involves gathering cultural information by observing people’s behavior in public and private spaces and participating in their lives. This proved valuable for gaining an understanding of the gendered organization of social and private life.10 Table 2 outlines the social spaces in which we conducted participant observation and the types of observations made in those locations.

Finally, a researcher from IOS and I collected popular cultural and archival material related to marriage, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS.

### TABLE 1—Key Characteristics of 15 Informants Who Provided Specialized Knowledge Pertinent to the Study of Doi Moi and the Political Economy of Men’s Extramarital Sexual Relations and Marital HIV Risk: Hanoi, Vietnam, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Key Informants’ Occupations (Gender)</th>
<th>Topics Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economist (female)</td>
<td>Women, family, gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Union official (female)</td>
<td>Public Policy, development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer for Women’s Union (female)</td>
<td>Law, legal changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District commune official (female)</td>
<td>Drug use, HIV/AIDS, community response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two sociologists (1 male, 1 female)</td>
<td>Public health, family, HIV/AIDS, marriage, sexuality, men’s and women’s extramarital sexual relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project officer with Vietnamese nongovernmental HIV/AIDS organization (male)</td>
<td>Community outreach efforts regarding HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel manager and xe om* driver (male)</td>
<td>Economic organization of commercial sexual intercourse, men’s extramarital sexual relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two gay men—apparel buyer and writer (males)</td>
<td>Men having sex with men, emerging visibility of gay men, coming out to family and friends, gay men’s social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook, housekeeper (female)</td>
<td>Gendered norms of family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist (female)</td>
<td>Historical perspective on rapid cultural changes in Hanoi, pressures on men to have extramarital sexual relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three health professionals (2 female, 1 male)</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS programs, policy, interventions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Motorcycle taxi.

### HIV INFECTION IN VIETNAM

The first case of HIV infection in Vietnam was reported in 1990 in Ho Chi Minh City. By 1999, HIV infection had been reported in all 61 provinces of the country. From the mid- to late 1990s the epidemic was mainly driven by injection drug use (heroin) among young urban men, who accounted for as much as 80% of reported HIV cases. More recently, the epidemic has developed among female sex workers, injection drug users' female partners and their children, and urban men who have sexual intercourse with other urban men. In September 2005, the Ministry of Health announced that injection drug use, sex work, and husband-to-wife transmission were fueling the Vietnamese epidemic.11 The 2006 United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS update estimated that there were 37 000 new HIV cases in 2005 and that the number of people living with HIV infection more than doubled between 2000 and 2006, from 122 000 to 280 000. It currently is estimated that 100 people are infected daily and that the number of infections caused by sexual transmission is higher than those caused by injection drug use.12 The epidemic continues to move into the general population and shows no sign of abating. Prevention of HIV has been hampered by government policies that stigmatize individuals...
TABLE 2—Participant Observation for Understanding the Gendered Organization of Social and Private Life In the Study of Doi Moi and the Political Economy of Men’s Extramarital Sexual Relations and Marital HIV Risk: Hanoi, Vietnam, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dance clubs, night clubs</td>
<td>Nightly social activities, male leisure activities, male homosexuality, sexualized consumer practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks, lakes, swimming pools, ice cream shops</td>
<td>Family, courting couples, youths socializing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House doorsteps, corner fruit stand, alley noodle soup and tea stands</td>
<td>Modern marriage—changing consumer practices around marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedding and bridal gown shops</td>
<td>Gendered sociality, modern consumer practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cafés, tea shops, reataurants, street-side stalls, bia hoa</td>
<td>Sexualization of advertising, consumer items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markets, shopping mall, stores</td>
<td>Celebration of the individual, new consumer practices with regard to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthday parties, stores that cater to children</td>
<td>Street-side socializing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidewalk street vendors</td>
<td>Venues for intimacy and sexual intimacy, infrastructure of sex industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nha nghi, ngi tam, garden cafés, fishing huts, mini hotels, karaoke, café om, cruising for street-side and park-based sex workers</td>
<td>Women’s Union activities at the neighborhood level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Participant observation is the gathering of cultural information by observing people’s behaviors in public and private spaces and participating in their lives.

*Beer gardens.
*Gendered sociality, modern consumer practices
*Rest houses.
*Rest houses outside Hanoi.
*“Hugging cafés”—cafés that may provide some privacy for customers, such as seating behind plants or dividers.

who engage in behaviors that put them at risk of HIV infection.  

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Although men and women certainly engaged in extramarital sexual relations prior to Doi Moi, 14 men’s opportunities to do so were far less restricted and much more frequent after Doi Moi than they were before. The findings from our research corroborate existing behavioral studies and indicated that Hanoi men of different occupations and socioeconomic circumstances were seeking sexual intercourse outside marriage. 15 Nine of the 27 married men we interviewed reported having had extramarital sexual relations. Among our informants, 2 factory workers (aged 34 and 36 years), a rice seller (aged 38), 2 private drivers (aged 31 and 51), 2 xe om drivers (aged 55 and 44), an electrician (aged 41), and a lawyer (aged 58) admitted to having had extramarital sexual relations. 16 The majority had liaisons with sex workers. At least half of these men spent time with sex workers in the context of a group of men socializing together. Significantly, all 27 men had some friends or acquaintances who were having extramarital sexual relations, which led the research team to believe that extramarital sexual relations among our sample were more prevalent than reported.

Attitudes toward men’s extramarital sexual relations varied. The majority of our informants responded with comments such as, “Vietnamese men, like all Southeast Asian men, need and like to experience new and exotic things,” or “Men need more sex than women.” Some dismissed such notions and instead explained that the men who were having extramarital sexual relations were newcomers to Hanoi who had money for the first time and did not know what to do with it so they spent it on sex workers. A key informant explained that lots of people were experimenting with sexual relations these days, not just married men, as a result of having seen new images from the United States. All of our informants attributed the current prevalence of men’s extramarital sexual relations to Doi Moi.

**DOI MOI’S GENDERED MARKET ECONOMY**

We found that Doi Moi has instigated an iterative process among a global market economy that produces men’s desire for women outside the home (and supplies these women), facilitates a notion of masculinity tied to commercialized and sexualized leisure (ensuring the demand for sex workers), and generates the means to purchase these sexual “commodities.” This process began in 1986 when the Vietnamese government started to transform the economy from a centrally planned economy to a market economy with a socialist direction. The larger aim was competing in the global economy. In addition to dismantling agricultural-based cooperatives in favor of household production, the state removed most welfare subsidies, resulting in the eradication of social safety nets, including health care, childcare, and care for the infirm, and reductions in educational support. 17 The state began to downsize and close state factories, promoted private enterprise, and enabled the expansion of import and export markets. The state’s decision to integrate with the global market economy has led to a widening of employment opportunities, a profusion of household-based business ventures, and a multitude of private leisure establishments now accessible to Hanoi residents, whose standard of living has doubled since 1986. Integration has brought an abundance of consumer items such as DVD players, motorized vehicles, and cell phones, as well as access to the Internet and foreign films, literature, and news, items not available on a large scale a decade ago. 18 Media from around the world, particularly from the West, have provided new images of marriage, love, romance, sexual intimacy, and sexual relations.
Rapid economic and social transformation has created unintended consequences. Hanoi is becoming increasingly socially stratified with the emergence of a highly visible moneyed class, and it now possesses a burgeoning sex industry, of which, according to our research, many men are taking advantage. A common factor underlying men’s infidelity in our study was the role of the market economy in shaping men’s opportunities for, access to, and personal motivations for extramarital sexual relations in 3 ways. First, the global market economy has led to the commercialization and sexualization of men’s leisure in Hanoi. Compared with past generations, men today are more likely to spend their leisure time and disposable income at establishments that use women to attract customers. Second, the market economy has produced a new male identity that links consumption to sexual activity. Third, Hanoians have more time and money than they did before Doi Moi, which enables them to consume the goods marketed to them.

Doi Moi has transformed Hanoi from a quiet city with little commercial activity to a city bursting with commodities. As Drummond pointed out, Doi Moi has made possible and encouraged the commercialization of leisure space and the commodification of leisure itself. Leisure is now consumption, direct or indirect, where previously conspicuous or even moderate consumption of leisure was frowned upon and discouraged.

The new leisure establishments provide private spaces for couples to meet, in contrast to the pre–Doi Moi era, when the only places to go in Hanoi were people’s homes, the park, or street-side stalls run by residents who more than likely knew one’s identity.

The sexualization of commercialized leisure spaces developed in the late 1980s with the aid of the emerging business sector. In the early phases of Doi Moi, male entrepreneurs from state and privately owned businesses treated clients to food, drink, and the services of sex workers for the purpose of establishing personal ties that would facilitate economic transactions. Such practices have become obligatory in many industries today and have spawned a new set of enterprises geared to providing sexual services for men. These businesses offer men with different needs, incomes, work schedules, and marital situations with a range of opportunities to engage in extramarital sexual relations. A former manager (aged 57 years) of a mini-hotel told me, “We provided male guests the service of finding pretty girls so the men would not be lonely while they were away from their families. A lot of mini-hotels were built in the mid- to late-1990s. Providing women enabled us to remain economically competitive.”

The changing Hanoi landscape now includes a dizzying array of spaces where men can go for sexualized encounters with women, either to purchase sexual intercourse or where lovers can go for privacy: nhà nghỉ (rest houses), karaoke, hairdressers, barber-shops, nightclubs, garden cafes, cafes, massage parlors, fishing huts, bus stations, dance halls, train stations, and of course, the street. We witnessed 2 trysts one day in a cafe after lunch: 2 separate couples (aged approximately in their late 20s to early 30s) arrived at the cafe, but instead of drinking coffee in the front room with the other patrons, they were furiously escorted to private rooms in the back where they would not be seen. This is just 1 example of the way in which commercial establishments provide anonymous spaces for people to be alone, spaces that were not available to such a degree prior to Doi Moi.

As men’s leisure has become increasingly commoditized, men’s consumption has become a means for demonstrating their social mobility and social class. During our research in 2004 and 2005, men’s ability to pay for food, drink, and prostitutes enabled them to exert a masculinity that was not socially condoned or available to an earlier generation. One of my informants who worked for a United Nations agency told me that his Vietnamese office mates frequently boasted about their weekend sexual exploits. Another male informant recounted his boss’s pride in having an affair with an attractive young secretary. She accompanied him on business trips; his wife must stay home with the children.

Our informants told us about cases that provided evidence that many different kinds of men were demonstrating their masculinity by engaging in homosocial activities, including sexualized leisure activities. Homosociality, in this context, refers to heterosexual men who, while spending time with other men, perform for each other (not women) as a means (whether acknowledged or not) to demonstrate their masculinity. When women are present, they typically serve as objects through which men prove their manliness. The most common situations involve groups of men socializing with one another.

Not all men go out looking for sexual intercourse; a few of our male informants spoke of being pressured to enjoy the services of young women or sex workers when socializing with other men. A private driver (aged 26 years) stated, “If a pretty girl sits on my lap and I refuse her she will ask me if I am crazy or if I lost my penis or whether it doesn’t work anymore.”

Our informants believed that the economic expansion under Doi Moi has created an environment in which people have the time to think about sexuality and the money to pay for it if necessary. One female key informant (aged 37 years) explained, “People are not starving anymore like they were in the 1980s; they have money and time to spend on other things in life like food and sex.”
A retired male sewing factory employee (aged 68 years) noted that until relatively recently he and his friends had no money or places to go to spend money on women. Nowadays, he has more time and he has money so he and his co-workers go to places with young women (karaoke or massage), especially when they are away on business.

The result of the sexualization of men’s leisure and societal pressures to engage in a masculinity that is based on the demonstration of one’s ability to enjoy women outside the home is putting men at risk of contracting HIV from sex workers and other young women positioned to attract men to commercial establishments and, thus, at risk of transmitting HIV to their wives.

1986 LAW ON MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY AND THE HAPPY FAMILY CAMPAIGN

Although bearing and raising children has always been key to a woman’s familial and social status in Vietnam,38 a consequence of the patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system, women’s reproductive role has become intensified under Doi Moi.39 This is a result of the government establishing the household as the primary economic unit, making the family, rather than the commune or nation, the focus of state-building efforts. Two Doi Moi policies in particular serve to intensify women’s focus on motherhood and family: (1) the 1986 Law on Marriage and the Family, which garnered public discussion and acknowledgment that women’s identity is first and foremost grounded in being a mother, and (2) the Happy Family campaign, the new population policy that links the nation’s efforts to modernize to couples’ ability to create “happy, wealthy, harmonious, and stable families.”40

Our research showed that these 2 policies have shaped our informants’ marital lives in at least 2 ways. First, they make individuals dependent on the marital unit for survival in the new market economy, which renders economic stability the benchmark of a successful marriage and induces women to acquiesce in their husband’s extramarital sexual activity to maintain economic and social status. Second, they encourage a gendered division of marital labor, which reinforces patriarchal norms that promote male homosociality. These unequally gendered consequences in turn provide opportunities for and structure the type of sexual relations men seek outside marriage, promoting short-term liaisons with sex workers. Because men do not always use condoms with sex workers, their trysts put them and their wives at risk of HIV infection.

In contrast with trends around the world, in which companionship is a “deliberate goal of marriage” and “individual fulfillment and satisfaction rather than (or in addition to) social reproduction” define the marital project,31 the underlying criteria for the Vietnamese Happy Family policy is determined by the success of the marital project itself, a project our informants described in terms of social reproduction and economic stability, not individual or couple satisfaction. These attitudes were reflected in their notions of the ideal spouse, shared topics of conversation, how they spend time together, and their definitions of marital fidelity.

The unintended irony of this marital project is that it structures men’s opportunities for engaging in extramarital liaisons in ways that put men and their wives at increased risk of HIV infection. This is because the Happy Family and marital fidelity are ultimately defined not in terms of sexuality but in terms of economics. When we asked our informants what characteristics made an ideal spouse, economic stability was foremost on their lists, as was good character.42 All but our youngest respondents felt that if a man provides for his family, he is fulfilling his familial obligations regardless of whether he is having extramarital sexual relations.43 He is being faithful to his wife and family.

In some cases, tolerance for a husband’s extramarital sexual relationships was an articulated expectation of the husband. For example, when the middle-aged manager of a massage parlor told his wife she had better get used to his spending time with other women because it was his profession, she put up with it for the benefit of her children and marriage. She did what many women are reputed to do—swallow their anger at infidelity.44 By remaining silent and continuing to take care of the children and the house, she in turn was fulfilling her wifely duties.45

The inability of the wives in our study to discuss sensitive issues was exacerbated by the fact that their husbands may not talk to them about issues beyond the family (e.g., their professional or social activities, places they go, or conversations with other men). A xe om driver (aged 55 years) who frequently went out with married male friends to drink and find women explained, “It would not be appropriate.” A private driver (aged 68 years) said it would “not be interesting.” One young newlywed said she had no idea what her husband did at work or with his friends.

When we inquired about shared topics of conversation, all our informants responded that they principally discuss family issues: household finances, upkeep of the house, children’s education, and extended-family members. Romance, sexuality, and their relationship were typically not discussed.

As Robin Sherrif has pointed out, silence is not necessarily an individual choice; it is a “shared silence” that is socially organized, expected, and recognized.46 This shared silence makes the couple to maintain the semblance of a happy family, upon which their economic and social status rests. This silence also makes it difficult for women to determine whether their husbands are engaging in risky behavior that could put both of them at risk of HIV infection.47

Gendered patterns of labor structure husbands’ and wives’ time differently, ultimately providing men the justification for spending time away from home in situations in which they encounter opportunities to engage in extramarital sexual relations. The 1986 Law and the Happy Family campaign, by tying women’s identity and status to reproduction and the family, has reinvigorated traditional patterns of household labor, making women more responsible for domestic work than men. This trend has been augmented by other economic policies that have caused women to be laid off from state-sector jobs more readily than men, leading to an increase in women’s household-sector employment, which keeps women closer to home.48 Our participant observation revealed that married women with children did most of the domestic work, leaving them with far less leisure time than their husbands.
The husbands’ role, on the other hand, as “pillar of the family” requires them to have a good understanding of society; it encourages and enables men to explore the urban environment and to socialize with male friends in new gendered social spaces. When we asked our informants how they spent their leisure time, men said they spent it at home or out with other men eating, or drinking tea or beer. Men’s marital roles typically require them to be mobile, a key factor associated with men’s extramarital sexual relations and HIV risk. The gendered division of labor provides men with more leisure time and mobility to encounter social situations in which women or sex workers make themselves available. By contrast, when women have free time, they spend it with the family and with other women who have children near home. I cannot count the number of times I have socialized with men whose wives could not join us because they were taking care of children. It is not surprising then that we rarely observed married women enjoying time together or older married couples spending time alone in commercial leisure spaces in Hanoi, aside from the lunchtime break.

The emphasis Doi Moi policies place on economic fidelity in turn structures the type of extramarital sexual relations married men engage in. Eight of the nine men in our study who reported having engaged in extramarital sexual relations said they had liaisons with sex workers. This type of liaison was considered preferable to taking a lover because visiting a sex worker is “finite, temporary” and need not require a large commitment of time and money. A young married man employed at a tourist company explained his visits to sex workers in Hai Phong as follows:

This kind of activity doesn’t have much impact on our families. A husband’s job is to provide for the family, to make sure his children are well brought up. And, the relationships men have with sex workers are short and cho rui [for fun] only.

According to these men, a sex worker posed no risk to family stability. Taking a lover, on the other hand, risks draining a man’s resources if he should become emotionally involved or if she should become pregnant. Ironically, extramarital sexual relations with commercial sex workers enable husbands to enjoy “erotic sex” that they believed did not pose a risk to family happiness. However, the shared silence around men’s extramarital sexual activities does pose a threat to wives through risk of HIV infection.

More than a decade after promulgation of the Happy Family campaign, the Women’s Union has begun to recognize that the sex industry poses a danger to the Happy Family campaign and ideal, in particular, the risk of HIV infection. To counter the pull of the sex market, the Women’s Union encourages women to remain sexually alluring to their spouses to keep them faithful. One man (aged 47 years) echoed this message, “A woman should look very pretty so her husband will value her.” This notion is also reflected in market developments. Beauty parlors, beauty contests, aerobics, dancing and fitness clubs, and fancy clothing stores, including sexy lingerie shops, have sprung up throughout Hanoi to cater to women’s new concerns about body image and their ability to keep their husbands faithful.

We found that this strategy, which places the responsibility on wives to remain sexually attractive, renders women ideologically and structurally inferior to their husbands. This makes wives more likely to acquiesce to their husbands’ infidelities and perhaps less likely to employ risk reduction strategies such as initiating condom use or discussing HIV risk. Many of our male and female informants spoke of a husband’s right to seek sexual intercourse outside marriage if his wife could not satisfy him. A xe om driver said that he would go outside the home for sexual intercourse when his wife was menstruating or pregnant. He chuckled that sometimes when he left the house, she would joke, “Don’t bring anything home.” By failing to address men’s responsibility for engaging in risky sexual intercourse, the government and society have allowed men to continue conceptualizing their marital fidelity in economic rather than sexual terms.

The lack of focus on men’s responsibility might explain our informants’ inconsistent condom use with sex workers and lovers. If men used condoms with these extramarital sexual partners, there would be no inherent relation between these patterns of extramarital sexual intercourse and married women’s HIV risk. However, men do not use condoms consistently. Men we interviewed who engaged in extramarital sexual intercourse typically said they used condoms with sex workers. Yet, behavioral studies of sex workers and their clients in Hanoi have indicated that condom use is low. In addition, the extremely high abortion rate in Vietnam indicates that many men are not using condoms to protect against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. One divorced man said that there is no need to use a condom with high-class sex workers because they are clean, implying that they are disease-free. None of the men we interviewed felt it was necessary to use a condom with a girlfriend or a wife. Should he do so, both women would be suspicious that he was having sexual intercourse with someone else. The risk of HIV transmission was most evident in the behavior of a driver (aged 51 years) who insisted on “kicking barefoot.” He did not use condoms with his lover, his wife, or the sex worker.

Thus, whereas Doi Moi policies have driven men into the commercial economy for status and leisure activities, they tend to reinforce women’s orientation to the home, allowing husbands’ greater access to extramarital sexual liaisons without the risk of being caught by their wives. Furthermore, economic and social restructuring have led to women’s dependency on the marital unit, inhibiting their ability to protect themselves from HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases within marriage.

**POPULATION MOVEMENT, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE, AND MORAL ISSUES**

“Rice is essential but tiresome; you should get some noodles.” As this joke implies, your spouse is your rice (com), but is bland and gets tiresome, so you should go out for some noodle soup (pho). Pho is sweet and delicious. Like men’s opportunities for new kinds of sexual experiences, pho became more available outside the home in the mid-1990s when this saying began to circulate in Hanoi. This joke foreshadowed increasing economic freedom and a modern male masculinity that for some would become increasingly linked to the global economy, consumption, and sexuality.
It also speaks to shifting marital ideals and a changing urban environment. These social changes have been shaped by the state’s decision to loosen its direct control over population movement and public and private spaces. In the process, despite its efforts to the contrary, the state is losing command over moral issues. These factors have contributed to the ease with which married men seek extramarital sexual relations and have hampered efforts to reduce heterosexual HIV transmission.

In contrast with the prior era, when migration was limited by the state, the opening of the economy has been accompanied by an increasingly mobile workforce. White-collar Hanoi residents frequently travel to other parts of Vietnam or overseas for work or educational purposes, leaving their families behind for extended stays. Large numbers of migrants seeking economic opportunity have moved to the cities, dramatically changing the urban landscape and the social dynamics of city life. Among these migrants are young women from rural areas who have come to Hanoi to seek employment in the sex industry. The state’s passive accommodation of this industry has led to a dramatic increase in the number of sex workers in Hanoi and in men’s opportunities for extramarital sexual relations.

The Vietnamese government also lifted restrictions on foreign visitors and foreign residents. Hanoi has become a much more diversified and open society. Describing the change, one Hanoi native (man aged 50 years) said,

> It used to be a small town; we knew everyone and everyone knew what we were doing. Now you don’t even know the person living next to you; the social connections between people are looser. As a result, you can pretty much do anything you want and no one will know.

This anonymity, coupled with the ability to make furtive arrangements by cell phone and to get across town quickly via motorbike, has contributed to men’s and women’s ability to engage in affairs unbeknownst to their friends, neighbors, and spouses. For instance, a xe om driver showed me how easy it was for a man with a motorbike to locate sex workers around the city, and also told me about the ease with which he maintained relations with an old lover who lived on the outskirts of Hanoi. His wife, on the other hand, did not leave home as frequently; she was occupied with the children and with selling pho out of their house.

New forms of geographic mobility and labor migration have provided men with frequent access to extramarital sexual relations. According to our findings, professions that provide men the most opportunities for extramarital sexual relations were white-collar jobs (state and private enterprises) and the entertainment, hotel, and transportation industries. What men in these industries have in common is mobility in a manner and to an extent that their wives do not share.

Of the 9 men in our marital case studies who had extramarital sexual relationships, 4 were in the transportation business. One informant (aged 68 years) who drove a passenger car for a private company described how his boss always provided food, drink, and women for his work associates when they were traveling out of town; the driver was included in these “business meetings” when he wished. We were also told about a truck driver who transported goods down south and had developed a relationship with a woman whom he visited regularly when on business trips. The employee of the local tour company showed me a couple of nondescript nghi tam (bath rest houses) 50 km outside Hanoi on a fairly major travel route. A nghi tam provides traveling men with the opportunity to rest, shower, and enjoy the company of a woman if they wish. Married women, then, are at risk for HIV infection by virtue of their husband’s mobility.

In addition to increased mobility, many of our informants attributed men’s extramarital sexual relations to the influence of ideas and images accessible through foreign media that portray alternative ideas of sexuality, intimacy, and marital relations. One male informant (aged 40 years), when answering my question about the impact of media on extramarital sexual relations, said, “They stimulate desire for so many things. Not everyone can gain access to material goods, but they can have access to sex because it does not cost a lot.” Despite ongoing efforts to control the Internet and domestic publishing, the state has lost the level of control over imported commodities that it had until the early 1990s when most large consumer goods were purchased in governmental department stores or out of the country. Although a couple of our informants were experimenting with new types of sexuality with their spouse as a result of seeing new ideas in the media, many men were choosing to experiment outside marriage, putting themselves and their wives at risk of HIV infection.

The state also no longer has direct control over what kinds of activities take place in Hanoi. The nightly tours of downtown Hanoi I took guided by my xe om driver revealed the ubiquity and openness with which men of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds looked for sex workers in clubs, restaurants, on the street, and in neighborhood parks. Ironically, a well-known place to find prostitutes at night is across from the Hanoi Women’s Union. Almost all of our older informants commented on the ease with which men were able to engage in extramarital sexual relations today. This is remarkable given that prostitution remains illegal. Prior to Dai Moi, state employees who engaged in extramarital sexual relations put themselves at risk socially, economically, and politically. Now the state turns a blind eye to such behavior (despite the occasional reprimand of an uncouth official) and society accepts it, so men are able to engage in extramarital sexual relations with relative impunity. Although there have been discussions about shutting down karaoke bars, the state has yet to do so.

The government does make sporadic attempts to crack down on prostitutes. For instance, in its efforts to stop the transmission of HIV, the government issued the Three Reductions Campaign, which labels sex work as 1 of its 3 evils. The problem is that criminalization of sex workers portrays sex workers—not their clients—as the source of the problem, which allows men to deny the social (or medical) harm that results from their extramarital trysts. The inability or unwillingness of the state to sanction men directly and its passive accommodation in the development of the sex industry suggests a loss of control over “immoral” behavior.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Unless efforts are undertaken to change the structural factors that shape men’s opportunities for extramarital sexual relations, it will be difficult for men, sex workers, and married women to change their sexual behavior and reduce their HIV risk. I recommend a strategy that works with the private business sector and mass governmental organizations.

Our research demonstrated that many of our male informants were continually asked to participate in homosocial sexualized leisure activity as part of their company’s business practices. A structural approach to HIV prevention would strive to find alternative means for businesses to become economically competitive in the marketplace without having to provide women to their clients—for the men who engage in business transactions and for the commercial establishments that provide sexual services. The business community should take responsibility for the way it structures men’s opportunities for extramarital sexual relations.

A second recommendation is to create new work-based patterns of sociability that focus on heterosociality rather than on homosociality. Research has indicated that married couples who spend time with other married couples in social situations and who know each other’s families are less likely to engage in extramarital sexual relations than do men who do not know each other’s spouses.63 A promising project in Uganda that promotes heterosociality suggests that if men socialize with one another’s wives, they may be less likely to engage in homosocial behavior that enables infidelity.64 In turn, commercial establishments will begin to recognize a shift in demand for spaces that are enticing to men and their wives. The goal is to transform the social conditions that enable infidelity to take place.

A third recommendation is for mass organizations such as the Youth Union, the Women’s Union, and the Farmer’s Union to make men responsible for sexual fidelity, not just economic fidelity. First, the government could make it legal for all commercial establishments that offer private spaces for sexual intercourse and sex workers to sell condoms.65 Taking a structural approach to HIV prevention will alter the factors that make changing risky behaviors difficult.

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References

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13. The Vietnamese government first responded to the growing prevalence of HIV/AIDS in 1993. In the early 1990s, the government also launched a Social Evils Prevention Campaign to stop people from engaging in harmful practices such as drug use and prostitu- tion. Because the HIV/AIDS epidemic emerged coincident with increased drug use and prostitution, the Social Evils legislation developed in tandem with HIV/ AIDS legislation. The state currently is making a con- certed effort to negate the association between the campaigns and HIV/AIDS, having recently recognized its detrimental effects on the prevention and control of the spread of HIV/AIDS. Mass organizations such as the Women’s Union and the Youth Union, Buddhist organizations, and People Living With AIDS organiza- tions provide information and education on preventing HIV transmission, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and eradicating stereotypical images of HIV-positive people.


15. A recent study by Family Health International stated that “Married male respondents estimated that based on personal experience, 70–90% of men they knew had sex outside of marriage” (Hoa, Behind the Pleasure, 15). Our study focused on men’s heterosexual sexual intercourse. However, our research in addition to other research has suggested that gay men are be- coming more outspoken and visible in the demonstration of their sexual preferences. Given that many men who have sexual intercourse with other men are mar- ried and keep their homosexual behavior a secret be- cause of social stigmatization combined with their in- creased risk of HIV infection, they may well be placing their wives at risk of HIV. See Colby, “Men Who Have Sex With Men.”

16. Because of the small sample size of male marital case study informants who admitted to having extramarital sexual relations, it is difficult to make any generalizations regarding the relationship among gener- ation, class, and occupation. Nonetheless, newlywed men in our study appeared to have less extramarital sexual relations than did men who had been married for longer periods of time. This could be attributable to the fact that the younger couples said they talked with their spouse more openly and comfortably about their marital sexual relationships, whereas many of the older women had never done so. The variety of differ- ence ages and kinds of men we heard about from our informants or that we saw looking for opportunities for extramarital sexual relations corroborated existing be- havioral studies. See Thang, “Sexual Behavior Related to HIV/AIDS.”


20. By sexualization, I mean providing sex workers or other women as part of a customer’s options.

21. The market also targets women, but in different ways. Whereas the market provides men with sexual services, the market provides women with products geared toward their appearance and their home (e.g., clothing, jewelry, toys, cribs, strollers). For a discussion on the changing urban environment in Hanoi, see Drummond, "Street Scenes.”

22. This is a marked change from the early Doi Moi era when there were few leisure establishments in Hanoi that required spending money, aside from the circus, the zoo, amusement park rides, tea stalls, bia hoi (fresh beer joints), and an occasional trip to a temple or touristic site. Beginning in the mid-1990s, restaurants, karaoke, and cafes sprung up enticing those with money to come spend their leisure time and money.


24. See Nguyen-Vo, “Governing Sex.”


26. The opportunity to have places to go to be inti- mate with someone is remarkable, particularly when contrasted to the 1960s and 1970s when, according
to one older male informant, it was difficult to kiss and hug your girlfriend because there was no place to go to do it and the Youth Union patrolled the streets keeping a lookout for transgressive behavior. He recounted having been told to go home by a Youth Union cadre while he was sitting on a public bench with his arm around his girlfriend.


28. Not all of the sexualized leisure involves sexual intercourse. Rather, it can range from having a particularly attentive waitress to having one who offers to meet a client later at another location. Yet, it is in these spaces that the opportunities for engaging in sexual intercourse present themselves.

29. Nguyen Van Cu Street on the other side of the Chuong Duong Bridge, which leads out of Hanoi, and the road perpendicular to it running along the Red River are lined with newly built “skinnies,” most of which are nha nga (rest houses) that provide rooms for rent and male and female sex workers. Nguyen Van Cu Street is so infamous, men tease each other with the joke, “Have you been to see Ong Cu [Mr. Cu] yet?”

30. In the early 1990s, karaoke bars were principally places in which friends could go to sing. Some karaoke became known as karaoke om (hanging karaoke), where waitresses would keep the male singers company. Men would tease each other by asking whether they had “karaoke arm.” Gradually some businesses, big and small, began to provide private rooms for their male clients to sing in private with pretty girls. Some bia hoi (fresh beer) establishments became bia om (hanging beer) places, but these were public and not as popular as the karaoke om. At the same time, not all karaoke cater to men who are looking for women.

31. Cafes that serve coffee in the front room may well provide private rooms in the back for those in the know. Because the clients who visit these private rooms are usually married, but not to each other, an employee or owner of the cafe will turn the patrons’ motorcycles around so the license plates cannot be seen from the street, preventing suspicious husbands and wives from finding cheating spouses.

32. For a detailed description of the different kinds of sex workers in Hanoi, the kind of the establishments they work in, and the range in cost, see Tran, “Drug Use, Sexual Behaviors and Practices.”

33. Through the ethnographic research I conducted in mid-1980s, I learned that in addition to finding secluded places in a park, another strategy for being alone with a lover was to arrange to go to a friend’s house and have the friend sit outside to make sure no one would come in. The difference is that these are not commercial spaces.

34. For a discussion of this process in Ho Chi Minh City, see Earl, “Leisure and Social Mobility.”

35. Our research findings were consistent with those of a recently published study by Family Health Interna-tional, which found that unmarried men like to go out with one another as a group to have fun. It is within the context of these group situations that men encour-
embarrassed to talk about it with their husbands or did not think it appropriate to broach a topic not considered polite. It is not surprising that the abortion rate in Vietnam is so high. For an elaboration on the subject of “the eroticized . . . wife,” see Nguyen-Vo, “Governing Sex.”

52. Thang et al.’s survey of university students, factory workers, government officials, businesses, service providers (including hotel and restaurant workers), and mobile workers (drivers and other mobile laborers) in Hanoi indicated, “A number of men think that having sex with expensive prostitutes, young girls, and girls who live in remote areas is safe” and therefore do not use condoms with those women. Only 36.4% of those surveyed always used condoms (Nguyen Minh Thang et al., “Sexual Behavior Related to HIV/AIDS: Commercial Sex and Condom Use in Hanoi, Vietnam,” Asia-Pacific Population Journal [September 2002]: 51). Another study, a small qualitative study of drug use, sexual behaviors, and practices among female sex workers in Hanoi indicated that the client makes the final decision regarding whether to use a condom, and sex workers will frequently agree to not use a condom if they are offered more money (Tran, “Drug Use, Sexual Behaviors and Practices”).


54. According to the folklorist Tran Quoc Vuong, this joke, which I heard frequently from men (in their mid-20s to late 30s), when I was living in Hanoi in the early 1990s and again in 2004, is thought to be a new joke that emerged after the advent of Doi Moi.

55. The Social Evils campaign mentioned in endnote 13 is part of the government’s effort to maintain control over the private lives of its citizens. In the mid-1990s the government periodically raided the music and video collections of bars that catered to foreigners and also tried to limit the number of non–Vietnamese-language signs in Hanoi to control the “negative” influences coming from the West.

56. Migration studies have indicated that the majority of migrants are aged between 13 and 33 years. Men migrate in slightly larger numbers than do women. See Michael DiGregorio, A. Terry Rambo, and Masayuki Tanagawara, “Clean, Green, and Beautiful: Environment and Development Under the Renovation Economy,” in Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society, ed. H.V. Luong (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 171–200. Hanoi currently has a population of 2.5 million plus additional immigrants (300,000) from other provinces. As the population of Hanoi has grown, so has its urban land area. In 1960, the land area was 58 km² and by 1998 it had grown to 91 km², and it is expected to grow to 121 km² by 2010 (ibid., 190). For further discussion on urban changes, see M. Douglas et al., The Urban Transition in Vietnam (Hanoi, Vietnam: United Nations Development Programme, 2002). For an in-depth study of female migrants, see Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc, Female Labour Migration: Rural-Urban (Hanoi: Women’s Publishing House, 2001).

57. For an examination of this process of passive accommodation and the way in which the changing mode of governing contributed to the increase in the sex industry, see Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, Governing the Social: Prostitution and Liberal Governance in Vietnam During Marketization (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Disserta-

58. This ease of mobility can be compared to mobility in the early 1990s when bicycling was the dominant mode of transport and there were very few cell phones.

59. Although we did not conduct any research among men who had migrated into the city, small-scale behavioral studies have indicated that such men do seek the services of sex workers. See Thang, “Sexual Behavior Related to HIV/AIDS.” For studies on the relationship between migration and HIV, see Campbell, “Migrancy, Masculine Identities and AIDS”; and Hirsch, “The Social Constructions of Sexuality.”

60. Before Doi Moi, the government dictated what kind of clothing people could buy and made such decisions as what kind of bathing suits were appropriate for women. For a discussion on changes in consumer goods in Hanoi, see Lisa Drummond, “Gender in Post-Doi Moi Vietnam: Women, Desire, and Change,” Gender, Place and Culture 13 (2006): 247–250.

61. Drummond, “Street Scenes.”

62. Prior to 1959, men went to Kham Thien Street (then known as a red light district) in Hanoi’s old quarter to find prostitutes. At that time, prostitution and polygamy were legal, but business was principally confined to 1 locality. By contrast, in Hanoi today, men can find and are offered sexual intercourse throughout the city.

63. From its founding in 1954, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam tried various methods to rein in extramarital sexual activity. In 1959 the government revised the Law on Marriage and the Family to promote marriage based on free will, mutual respect, and love. Prostitution and polygamy already having been outlawed, monogamy could become the locus for satisfying men’s sexual and reproductive needs. During and after the Indochina wars, the party enacted punitive measures for party members who transgressed socialist marital ideals. As mentioned, in the mid-1990s, the government launched a Social Evils Prevention campaign to eradicate deviant behaviors by restricting “non-Vietnamese” cultural images and by condemning behaviors such as drug use, pornography, and prostitution. At the same time, at different historical moments, the state has acknowledged the need for some men to engage in extramarital sexual relations (e.g., to help older single women who “asked for a child” or to establish second marriages). SeePhinney, “Asking for a Child.” In the new Doi Moi era, the state’s acceptance, or as others may put it, its inability, to control men’s extramarital sexual activity takes on new meaning in an expanding market economy marked by an increase in a gendered social stratification and other forms of inequality.

64. The increase in the number of commercial spaces has also benefited gay men’s abilities to socialize publicly. Since Doi Moi, a few commercial establishments have opened that provide a space for gay men to socialize; these venues are important for making personal connections and provide married men the opportunity to meet men who are also interested in forming intimate sexual relations with other men.


66. Parikh, “Iatrogenic Risk.”

67. A program called “Inns with condoms” being im-