

Everybody knows, but nobody knows



Desk review of current literature on HIV and male-male sexualities, behaviours and sexual exploitation in Afghanistan

September 2008

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Joe Rittman, consultant to the Afghanistan National AIDS Control Programme for all his support and assistance, in pointing me in the right directions, and assisting me in identifying key available documents.

I would also particular like to acknowledge my special gratitude to Dr. Carol Jenkins and Dr. Gary Dowsett, two outstanding people working to confront the human challenges of HIV/AIDS, who think deep thoughts with caring, compassionate, and understanding, and who have always inspired me to always look beyond definitions and theory and explore lived experiences.

(Note Dr Carol Jenkins died on the 23rd January 2008, leaving an enormous gap in the lives of so many people in Asia and Pacific, particularly those who greatly benefited from her passion for her work, and her constant advocacy on the needs of highly vulnerable populations, including males who have sex with males.)

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A word of caution

From *Practicing Desire – homosexual sex in the era of AIDS*, Gary Dowsett, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, USA, 1996:

"It is probably not possible to know the extent of homosexual behaviour among males. What is clear from the research findings is that an incalculable number of men can and do have sex with other men, some frequently, some occasionally, in the right circumstances or at certain times in their lives, in certain sites or in certain institutional settings, with certain cultural overlays, or all the above." (p75)

"...a considerable diversity of contexts in which men pursue sex with other men." (p76)

"Many of the standard survey techniques may never obtain sufficiently accurate accounts of the extent of such activity. This is particularly true when such sexual matters are deemed unreportable for moral or legal reasons." (p76)

"Political/religious/cultural dynamics will always confound attempts to uncover just how sexually active [males] are...." (p76)

"The search for a definitive answer on the extent to which men have had and will have sex with other men is not going to offer a clue to the likely extent of this form of possible HIV transmission, and its geographical location. There is considerable doubt whether it is necessary to know the extent of homosexual practice among males in any country in order to develop public-health policy and to implement HIV and STD prevention strategies. More important is the consideration that no statistic on the extent of male-to-male sex, even of anal intercourse, should affect policy and budgetary decisions concerning prevention. This is so because it is not the *extent* of male homosexual behaviour that needs to be addressed, but the *diversity of the contexts* in which it is practiced." (p76)

Definition

The acronym MSM is usually taken for *Men Who Have Sex with Men*. However, the term *men* can be problematic within the context of different cultural definitions of Man, Manliness, and Manhood. In the context of NFI we will be using *MSM* to mean Males Who Have Sex with Males.

It should also be recognised that ‘MSM’ is a behavioural term and does not reflect a sexual identity. Within the use of the term ‘MSM’ and male-male sexual behaviours, there are many frameworks of ‘MSM’, from self-identified males with gender or sexual orientation, to those who anally penetrated other males as a masculine behaviour, to those who are situationally involved in male-to-male sex.

Within the framework of male-to-male sex, there is a range of masculinities, along with diverse sexual and gender identities, communities, networks, and collectivities, as well as just behaviours without any sense of affiliation to an identity or community. This statement addresses the concerns of all these diversities within the framework of *males who have sex with males*.

In this report, the author will be using the acronym MSM to mean males who have sex with males, or male-to-male sex, rather than the term men who have sex with men.

Acronyms

AHAPP	Afghanistan HIV/AIDS Prevention Project
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CBO	Community-based organisations
FHI	Family Health International
FSW	Female sex worker
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IDU	Injecting/intravenous drug users
MOPH	Ministry of Public Health
MSM	Males who have sex with males/men who have sex with men
NACP	National AIDS Control Programme
NFI	Naz Foundation International
NGO	Non-government organisation
ORA	Orphans and Refugees Agency
STI	Sexually transmitted infection
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Naz Foundation International (NFI)

Naz Foundation International is an international MSM agency headquartered in the UK, but working in South Asia on policy, advocacy and support on male sexualities and provides technical, institutional and financial support to MSM networks in South Asia to develop their own self-help responses to their sexual health needs.

It has conducted a broad range of situational and needs assessments among MSM in a variety of cities in the countries of South Asia, along with developing a range of implementation and management tools, training programmes, and other resources for MSM networks, groups and organisations, along with assisting in the development of some 28 MSM sexual health community-based projects in the region.

Shivananda Khan is the Chief Executive and founder of Naz Foundation International and has been the key principal researcher and developer of these studies and tools.

For more information on NFI please see their website www.nfi.net

Background

There is sufficient anecdotal evidence to indicate that male-male sexual behaviours, along with male child sexual exploitation and early sexual debut exist at significant levels in Afghanistan to cause concern, particularly with regard to child protection, along with addressing HIV risk and vulnerability among MSM.

The National AIDS Control Programme, MOPH, Afghanistan is implementing an HIV prevention, treatment, care and support programme, but lacks information on male-male sexual behaviours and the attendant risks and vulnerabilities.

NACP intends to conduct a rapid assessment of male-male sexual behaviours, exploitation, risks and vulnerabilities in order to understand the range of male-male sexualities and behaviours, the vulnerabilities of sexual exploitation, and risks of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, through a range of methodologies which take into account the sensitivity of the issue in Afghan culture.

Funding for this assessment is provided by UNICEF under the 2008 AWP (annual workplan) for Item 0.7.5.16.2 MARA and EVA national prevention strategy developed.

Purpose/Objective

The objectives of this assessment include:

1. To describe the characteristics of MSM with particular attention to adolescent and young males within community, entertainment, and congregate settings in Kabul, Kandahar, and Mazari-sharif as it pertains to HIV prevention.
2. To assess the circumstances of child abuse/exploitation within the context of MSM within communities, entertainment, and congregate settings in Kabul, Kandahar, and Mazar.
3. To strengthen the knowledge base for the HIV national response for MSM and child abuse/exploitation among the government, donors, and NGOs.
4. To make recommendations for a stronger capacity among the government, donors, and NGOs for appropriate service delivery on HIV prevention, care and support for MSM and children at risk of child abuse/exploitation.
5. To review the development of MSM community-based self-help and other appropriate approaches to HIV prevention, to reduce stigma and discrimination, and to reduce violence against children.

This desk review of current literature on male-male sexualities, behaviours and sexual exploitation in Afghanistan is a part of the rapid assessment of male vulnerabilities to HIV and sexual exploitation in Afghanistan.



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1. Executive summary

Afghanistan is emerging from 30 years of civil war, with significant issues of poverty, high fertility rates, low literacy, along with high levels of unemployment, low life expectancy, poor primary health care systems, and returning refugee populations.

While growing investment in development and infrastructure is occurring, Afghanistan is still being confronted by what is often called a “resurgent Taliban movement”, with regular attacks against the Afghanistan authorities and Coalition forces that are leading to increasing insecurity, fear and concern for the future.¹

Despite being a strongly conservative and traditional society, as well as defining itself as an “Islamic Republic”, Afghanistan has begun to confront the possibility of an HIV epidemic with the recognition that all the behavioural and socioeconomic factors that produce high levels of risk and vulnerability exist within the country. This includes the acknowledgement of the existence of highly vulnerable populations such as injecting drug users, female sex workers, and males who have sex with males.

This acknowledgement is clearly articulated in the 2007 Project Implementation Plan of the Afghanistan HIV/AIDS Prevention Project (AHAPP) of the National AIDS Control Programme, Ministry of Public Health.²

At the same time, there is significant anecdotal evidence that sexual exploitation and/or abuse of adolescent males by older men exists in what appears to be significant levels, and can, in some parts of the country, be considered a social norm within certain segments of Afghanistan society, particularly among certain populations.³

In the context of HIV, while there is some data on HIV prevalence, particularly in the context of injecting drug use, there is almost none regarding male-to-male sexual behaviours, nor any ethnographic studies on MSM to understand the dynamics of male-to-male transmission and their possible risk and vulnerability to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. What data does exist indicate a significant cross-over between injecting drugs users and male-to-male sexual behaviours.

This review synthesises what knowledge is available regarding male-to-male sexualities and behaviours in the context of Afghanistan, along with risks and vulnerabilities to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, along with highlighting the issue of adolescent male sexual exploitation and abuse. Apart from accessing official reports and studies, due to the paucity of information, a range of media articles and essays from 1980s that speak of “dancing boys”, “beardless youths” and pederastic customs in Muslim cultures and in Afghanistan. In addition, reports on MSM and HIV in a number of Muslim countries (such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Mahgreb), along with a range of books that speak of MSM in Muslim countries, and a range of reports, essays and studies produced by NFI available on its website were also reviewed. A listing of all these resources is available as an annexe in this report, as well as identified in footnotes where appropriate.

¹ Personal communications with various public officials during the Scoping Mission

² Page 7, under Objectives and Description of Programme, Goals and Objectives, Figure 1 *Preventing HIV among most at risk and vulnerable groups within Afghanistan*, and under Component 3, which states that “...these groups can include IDUs, sex workers, MSM, their clients, their partners and others.”

³ See *Boys of the Taliban* by Jamie Glazov, January 1 2007,

FrontPageMagazine.com <http://www.frontpagemagazine.com/Articles/ReadArticles.asp?ID=261990>, downloaded May 15 2008, where he discuss a rule 19 of the Taliban instructing Taliban fighters that they must not take young boys without facial hair into their private quarters. Also see *Bacabozlik: Boylove, folksong and literature in Central Asia*, Ingeborg Baldauf, (date and source of essay unknown) which focuses on this subject in Afghanistan, hard copy of essay in NFI Resource Centre, Lucknow, India. Further, in a range of discussions in Kabul and Mazar during the Scoping Mission, almost every conversation on HIV and male-to-male sex raised the issue of what was called *baacha bazee* – dancing boys and possible pederastic encounters.

While the majority of this literature does not specifically speak of the situation in Afghanistan, they do discuss the context of male- male sexualities and behaviours in both a historical and contemporary sense. These were contextualised in terms of Afghanistan as a Muslim country that borders Pakistan with historical links with India, and other Muslim countries.⁴

This review does not claim to be an exhaustive study of the issue of HIV, male-male sexualities, behaviours and sexual exploitation in Afghanistan. It does, however give a glimpse of the framework of male-male sexual practices in Afghanistan, and the complexities that this encompasses, along with a brief analysis of risks and vulnerabilities, and endeavours to come to an understanding on the nature and dynamic of male sexualities in the country that frames such sexualities along adolescent male sexualities and possible sexual exploitation.

Five key themes emerge from this review:

1. There is an enormous lack of data on male-male sexualities, practices, frameworks, population sizes, issues, needs and concerns, along with sexual networking and the extent of such behaviours
2. Male-to-male sexual behaviours do not form a monolithic oppositional binary with 'heterosexuality, but are expressed through a diversity of frameworks, where in Afghanistan these tend to be either age structured or based on gender performance within a structure of man/not-man. The partners of adolescent or feminised males do see themselves as being 'homosexual', but as masculine men who penetrate others.
3. There is a significant number of men in Afghanistan who are involved in the historical and traditional patterns of *bacha bazi*, the sexual involvement and exploitation of adolescent males.
4. There is a lack of appropriate services that address the needs of sexually exploited adolescent males, along with males who have sex with males, in an environment of significant risk and vulnerability, that could easily develop into a concentrated HIV epidemic unless addressed urgently
5. A sociocultural environment, along with religious and legal frameworks, that can be major impediments to developing appropriate services for sexually exploited adolescent males and MSM unless addressed sensitively.

Clearly, what the record shows, is that male-to-male sexual practices exist in Afghanistan, that they are possibly substantive within differing constructions of male-to-male sex, where they exist within high levels of risk and vulnerability in the context of HIV, other sexually transmitted infections, and a lack of human rights.

⁴ Zahiruddin Muhammad, the first Mughal ruler of India, was the son of Umar Sheikh Mirzza ruler of Farghana, a small principality of northern Afghanistan. He was known to have fallen in love with a boy called Baburi. Several Mughal rulers and members of the court were also known to keep boy harems. See *Same-sex love in India – readings from literature and history*, edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, MacMillan India Ltd, 2001.

2. Socio-economic information on Afghanistan

Population	32,738,376			
Age structure	Age range	%	Male	Female
	0-14 years	44.6%	7,474,394	7,121,145
	15-64 years	53%	8,901,880	8,447,983
	65 years+	2.4%	383,830	409,144
Life expectancy	44 years			
Fertility	6.58 children born/woman			
Literacy	28.1%; male-43.1%			
Ethnic groups	Pashtun	42%		
	Tajik	27%		
	Hazara	9%		
	Uzbek	9%		
	Aimak	4%		
	Turkmen	3%		
	Baloch	2%		
	Other	4%		
Languages	Dari	50%		
	Pashto	35%		
	Others	15%		
Religion	Sunni Muslim	80%		
	Shia Muslim	19%		
	Other	1%		
Labour Force	Agriculture	80%		
	Industry	10%		
	Services	10%		
Unemployment	40%			
Below poverty line	53%			

Source: www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html
 Downloaded, 2/9/08

3. What do we know about HIV and MSM in Afghanistan?

July 9, 2008: The Ministry of Public Health stated that “so far 435 HIV positive cases have been reported from different sources”, adding that “there are an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 cases nationwide”. The Ministry also stated that the potential risk factors for the spread of HIV include 30 years of war, high levels of poverty and illiteracy, displacement, poppy cultivation, drug trafficking and use, commercial and unsafe sex, and unsafe injection and blood transfusion practices (Source, sea-AIDS, 10/7/08)

A literature review by John Hopkins University⁵ stated the following:

General population HIV prevalence: 0.01%

(source: POP, NACP, MOPH, 2007 and CSO, Islamic republic of Afghanistan, 2007)

HIV prevalence among high risk groups:

Injecting Drug Users: 3.70%

(source: Todd C.S. et al. Prevalence of HIV, Hepatitis C, Hepatitis B, and Associated Risk Behaviours among Injecting Drug Users in Kabul, Afghanistan, 2006)

A mapping and situation assessment conducted by the University of Manitoba⁶ stated that the existence of high risk IDU networks include relatively high prevalence levels of hepatitis C (36.6%), Hepatitis B (6.5%) and syphilis (2.2%) from the same source.

HIV prevalence among other at-risk populations, specifically MSM, was classified as unknown in this report.

These reports recognise that HIV is an emerging issue of concern, and like other nations in Asia, has begun to rise amongst injecting drug users first.⁷ As Pakistan has illustrated⁸ it doesn't take long before HIV begins to spread out from an IDU base into other at-risk populations such as MSM and FSW. This is reiterated strongly in the Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia report, *Redefining AIDS in Asia: crafting an effective response*, released in March 2008.

A map demonstrating overlapping risk behaviours and links to the general population in an environment of multiple societal drivers if HIV transmission was used in a report *Understanding HIV in Afghanistan: the emerging epidemic and road ahead*.⁹

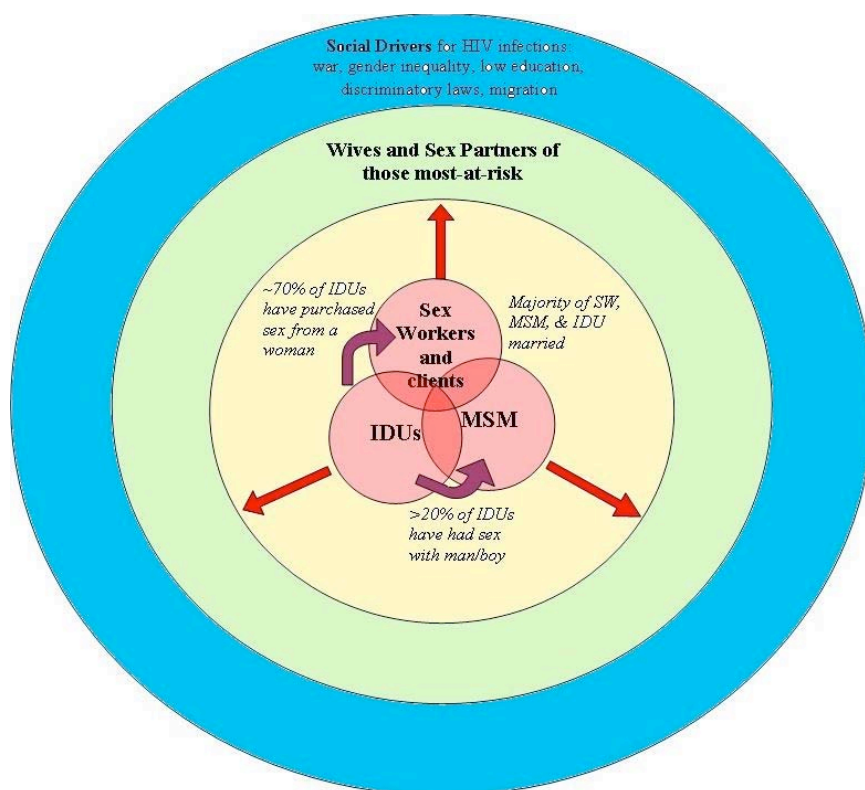
⁵ *HIV in Afghanistan: a review of literature and evidence of disease burden among vulnerable populations*, Andrea Wilson, John Hopkins University, Draft, 2008

⁶ *Mapping and Situation Assessment of High Risk Key Populations in Three Cities in Afghanistan, Final Report*, September 2007, University of Manitoba

⁷ See the Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia, *Redefining AIDS in Asia: crafting an effective response*, 2008, www.unaids.org

⁸ MSM in Pakistan – a review of existing literature, Dr Faran Emmanuel, Canada Pakistan HASP-PACP, national MSM consultation meeting, 2006 presentation

⁹ p10, *Understanding HIV in Afghanistan: the emerging epidemic and road ahead*, The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's National AIDS Programme, John Hopkins University/Indian Institute of Health Management Research, draft 2008 from qualitative source from 4 urban cities, Todd, C., Abed A., Strathdee, S., et al. Prevalence of HIV, viral hepatitis, syphilis and risk behaviors among Injection drug users in Kabul, Afghanistan. 2006; Todd, C et al. Seroprevalence and behavioral correlates of HIV, Syphilis, and Hepatitis B and C among High Risk Groups in three Afghan Cities. UCSD/IRC/Columbia University, 2008.



In the Manitoba report, MSM is mentioned, but with the caveat that information was very difficult to obtain. Thus it states that *key informants identified 12 – 21 men active in commercial sex in three districts (in Mazār-i-Sharif). However, since this activity is highly stigmatized in contemporary Afghan society, this likely reflects significant underreporting. In Mazār-i-Sharif, nine MSM primary key informants were interviewed, accessed through SM contacts. These informants confirmed that MSM activities are kept secretive amongst small networks. They indicated that risk seeking behaviour occurred mostly in the homes of clients with a frequency of about 3 clients /day. The primary KIs also reported that 100 or more MSM were selling sex in Mazār-i-Sharif, but the location and size of these networks was not confirmed.*"

And in Table H.1.2 – *Selected drug using and sexual behaviours of IDUs in Mazār-i-Sharif and Jalalabad, Afghanistan* in their report, it highlights cross cutting issues relating to IDU and MSM

	Mazār-i-Sharif (n=45)	Jalalabad (n=31)	Total (n=76)
Ever had sex with a male	22%	21%	21%
Had sex with a male in past 6 months	7%	0%	3%

The Todd study quoted above also mentions such crosscutting issues where it states that *risky behaviors, including sharing syringes (35.4%), paying women for sex (76.2%), and sex with men or boys (28.3%), were common.*

This is also illustrated in table of injecting users profile developed in the draft report from John Hopkins mentioned above where data from a number of studies were combined:¹⁰

¹⁰ Page 14, Table 2. Injecting Drug Users Profile. Key descriptive indicators of injecting drug use in Afghanistan by four urban centers: Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Jalalabad.

*Data from Todd, C & Scott P. UCSD/WRAIR/NAMRU Project, 2007

† Data from Action Aid KAP Study, 2006

° Data from University of Manitoba Mapping Study, 2007

Indicator	Kabul	Herat	Mazar-I-Sharif	Jalalabad
HIV Prevalence	3.0% (N=464); 2007*	3.1% (N=340); 2007*	No cases of HIV detected (N=187); 2007*	No cases of HIV detected (N=96); 2007*
Sex with men/boys: % of IDUs having had sex with men/boys	27% (N=464); 2007*	23.2% (N=623); 2007*		

In an ORA International survey of groups at high risk of contracting STIs and HIV in Kabul conducted in 2003-2004¹¹, while MSM is not mentioned as a specific risk group category¹² male-male sexual practices are mentioned several times in the report:

A number of cinemas in the area attract young boys who are often used for homosexual prostitution. The area also contains a number of police stations and many hotels with sleeping quarters for truck drivers and other transient people. The Mussafar Khana is a well-known place for truck drivers to sleep with many bus stations nearby. In addition District 1 has numerous musicians and male dancers, many of whom are known to provide commercial sex services.

ORA also surveyed government departments, such as the Department of Forensic Medicine, the Attorney General's Office, and also reviewed 2002 crime statistics. Unfortunately the ORA report conflates pederasty with homosexuality, so there was no breakdown between pederastic encounters where at least one of the partners involved was below 18 years,¹³ and those encounters where both partners were 18 years and above.

Thus, from the Department of Forensic Medicine:

Type of cases	Number of cases
Illegal heterosexuality (Vaginal sex)	65
Illegal heterosexuality (Vaginal and anal sex)	22
Illegal homosexuality	85
Total	172

I am intrigued by ORA's use of the word "illegal" here. I am presuming that "illegal heterosexuality" means pre-marital and extra-marital vaginal sex. But what is the difference between the first and second figures other than the inclusion of anal sex? Interesting, this the only document where I have found any mention of anal sex with females! Again, unfortunately this key datum was not followed through.

"Illegal homosexuality" – what does this mean? According to the Afghanistan Penal Code, male-male sexual behaviours are illegal, punishable by imprisonment, and if the *Sharia* is brought into play, death (see below for a discussion on the law). Also the use of the term "homosexuality" is also problematic, as it describes a "condition" or "orientation" and not a behaviour. But more on this later.

ORA's report goes on to state that the Attorney General's Office had recorded some 57 cases of pederasty in Afghanistan in the previous year (2202), while the United Report on Criminal Cases registered with the

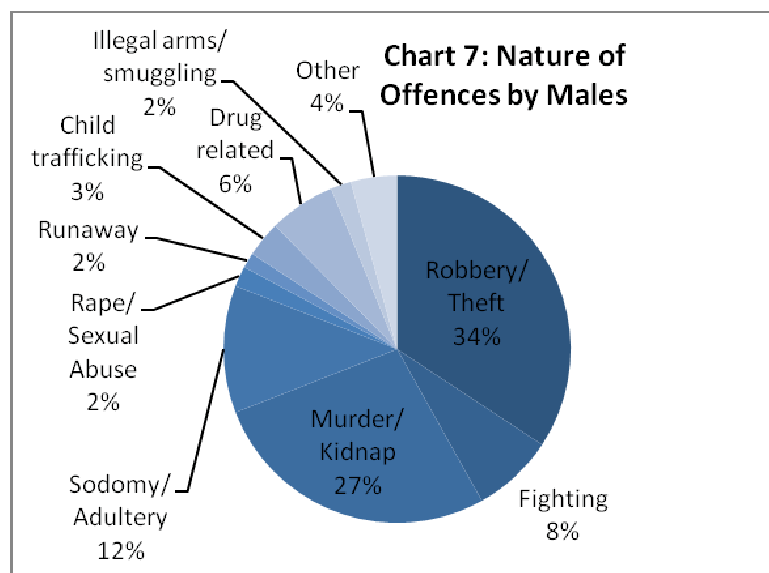
¹¹ *Survey of groups at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS in Kabul*, ORA International, April 2005

¹² At Risk Groups: Commercial sex workers (CSW's), Police officers, truck drivers and street children, including boot polishers, hotel workers and beggars, are at an increased risk of contracting HIV, ORA report, p4, Major Findings

¹³ The UNICEF definition of a child is someone below the age of 18 years of age. However, in many countries, the legal age of consensual sex whether between males and females, or between males and between females, varies considerably. In the UK, this age is 16 years.

Attorney General of Kabul Province and related branches for the time period of 1/11/1381 to 12/12/1381 recorded ...15 cases of pederasty within Kabul province's districts. Unfortunately, the conflation of the terms pederasty and homosexuality means that this particular datum, while interesting to point out, doesn't say that much.

In a study conducted by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission on the situation for children in conflict with the law in Afghanistan,¹⁴ with 247 respondents, they reported:



For males, 34% of cases were related to robbery/theft while 27% of cases were related to murder or kidnap. However, in many of these cases the juvenile may not have been the sole or even the primary defendant. 12% of cases were related to sodomy or adultery while only 2% of cases were related to rape or sexual abuse. 8% of male respondents had been charged in relation to fighting while a further 2% of cases were of boys who had run away from home.

4. An open secret

Bacha bazi, halekons, and adolescent male sexual exploitation in Afghanistan

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, a number of newspaper articles and media reports on the existence of a traditional male-male sexual practices regarding “beardless youths”, “dancing boys” and “boy game-player” have been published, both in Afghanistan, and elsewhere. These include:¹⁵

- *New Afghan rulers better for gays?*, Washington Blade, 21 December 2001
- *Kandahar comes out of the closet*, The Times, London, 12 January 2002
- *Shh, its an open secret: warlords and pedophilia*, New York Times, 21 February 2002
- *Kandahar's lightly veiled homosexual habits*, Los Angeles Times, 3 April 2002
- *Startled marines find Afghan men all made up to see them*, The Scotsman, 24 May 2002
- *Gay Afghanistan: homoeroticism among Kabul's warriors*, Gay City News, New York, 29 April-5 May 2004
- *The boy singers of Kabul*, Moby Capital Updates, 12 April 2005
- *Afghan tribesman faces death for wedding to teenage boy*, Sydney Morning Herald, 7 October 2005
- Personal correspondence with GlobalGayz – *the 'secret sex life of warlords and their trophy boys*, November 2006
- *Boys of the Taliban*, Front Page Magazine, 1 January 2007

¹⁴ *Justice for Children – the situation for children in conflict with the law in Afghanistan*, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, working draft, January 2008

¹⁵ All these articles were accessed through www.globalgayz.org between the period June – August 2008

- *Dancing boys of the north*, Afghan Monitor Press, October 2007
- *Dancing boys a mark of prestige in Afghanistan*, Pink News, 19 October 2007
- *Afghan boy dancers sexually abused by former warlords*, Reuters, 18 November 2007

As can be seen from some of these titles, terms such as “gay”, “closest”, and “homosexual” are liberally used, along with “trophy boys”, “boy singers”, “dancing boys”, and “boys of the Taliban”.

Often luridly told, along with some of them expressing a measure of distaste within a framework of orientalism,¹⁶ they attempt to describe a cultural dynamic of age-structured same sex desire and relationships in the context of a “warrior” nation, the Taliban, religious fundamentalism, and traditionality within an inappropriate Western binary construct of “straight” or “gay”. All grist to the mill to a media approach of exceptionalism, exoticisation, and a lack of knowledge and understanding of the sociocultural and historical context in which behaviours arise.

These articles report on age structured homosexual practices of the Pushto in Kandahar, birth place of the Taliban, of *halekons* and *ashanas*, while others speak of *bacha bereesh* and *dancing boys* in Kabul and Mazār-i-Sharif, where *dari* is the language spoken.

This is not the place to conduct a critical review of these articles, but rather it is to note that a traditional practice of same-sex desire expressed through age structured ‘homosexual’ practice was highlighted as a common phenomena across Afghanistan, amidst guns, commanders and the Taliban, making visible what was previously known, but not spoken about.

The concept of the beautiful boy, or the beardless [beautiful] boy, has strong historical roots that go back centuries across the Arab and Central Asia regions, expressed in Arabic poetry and Urdu ghazals.

In an essay written by Ingeborg Baldauf, *Bacabazlik: Boylove, Folksong and Literature in Central Asia*,¹⁷ she states at the beginning of this essay:

In Islamic tradition, Central Asia [and this includes Afghanistan] has had the reputation of being the region of boylove. Paederasty is said to have been introduced into Baghdad from Chorasán in the east, and even as early as the 9th and 10th century C.E. Afghanistan was regarded as the source of not only the loveliest boys, but of boylove itself (Adam Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams* – Heidelberg: 1922)

The whole essay is a description of this tradition and how it is expressed in Afghanistan Uzbek culture (i.e. Northern Afghanistan), and the use of the term *bacabozlik* (in Persian *bacaboz*). *Bacaboz*, or ‘boy gameplayer’, is a male adult whose “hobby is the association with boys”. While these relationships could be platonic and based on friendship, they often have sexual connotations, where the adult male will sexually penetrate the younger male. Usually the preference was for boys between the ages of 12 to 17 years, before the boy began to grow a beard. The boy was known as *baca*, or ‘dancing boy’.

We know the historicity of this practice from a range of written texts that exist and were widely known amongst the literate Arabs in the early years centuries of Islam. Thus

You know not how deep was the love in your eyes kindled within my soul, or how great was my suffering! Bless my beloved! He wished to visit me, but could not come near me because of his tear-drowned eyes; he feared the watchers, so he came to me quickly, taking all adornments off his neck, except his beauty. I offered cups of wine to him; the wine was put to shame by those honey-like lips, those pearly teeth! His eyelids were at last vanquished by slumber, wine made him obedient to all my wishes...

¹⁶ See Edward Said’s *Orientalism – Western Concepts of the Orient*, Routledge & Keegan, 1978

¹⁷ *Bacabozlik: Boylove, Folksong and Literature in Central Asia*, Ingeborg Baldauf, excerpt from *Die Knabenliebe in Mittel-asien: Bacabozlik*, Freie Universität Berlin, Forschungsgebietsschwerpunkt Ethnizität und Gesellschaft, Occasional Papers, Nr. 17 (Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch, 1988. The translation has been done by Gerard Moorman)

Ibn al 'Abbar (d.1041 C.E.) [Source: A.R. Nykl, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry and its Relation with the Old Provençal Troubadours* – Baltimore: J.H.Furst, 1946, pp 110-1]¹⁸

And such poetry was also popular in literary circles during late Mughal times, through the *ghazal*. A form of verse which originated in Persia and literally means “talking to the beloved”¹⁹

O God, how lovely are these Turkish boys -
To see them gladdens, as the coming of spring

While such accounts of history appear celebrate the context of boy love in the pederastic sense of young adolescent males in the few years before they become adults (expressed in the sense that the Taliban demanded that all men must have beards!), which echoes the ancient Greek traditions expressed through the writings of Socrates, Plato and others, and where an old Afghan proverb that stated *women are for children, boys are for pleasure*, times have changed, whilst some of these practices and beliefs still linger substantively in Afghanistan (and elsewhere, such as in Pakistan, the Middle East, and North Africa to name a few regions).

But notice in the quote from Ibn al 'Abbar above where he states “...wine made him obedient to all my wishes.”

And in the articles identified above, they speak of boys between 12 and 16, of “beardless boys”, of “sodomy with young boys”.

"When a man sees a boy he likes -the age they like is 15 or 16 -they will approach him in the street and start talking to him, offering him tea," said Muhammad Shah, a shop owner. "Sometimes they go looking in the football stadium, or in the cinema (which has yet to reopen). *Kandahar comes out of the closet*, *The Times*, 12/8/02

"I was only 14-years-old when a former Uzbek commander forced me to have sex with him," said Shir Mohammad in Sar-e Pol province. "Later, I quit my family and became his secretary. I have been with him for 10 years, I am now grown up, but he still loves me and I sleep with him." *Afghan boy dancers sexually abused by former warlords*, *Reuters*, 18/11/07

The idea of consent, adolescent sexualities as different from adult sexualities, the concept of the child evolving historically into its current incarnation, the ideas of the rights of the child, the concepts of child abuse, whether physical or sexual, all of these are relatively new concepts primarily arising in the last 50 years, first in Western nations, and gradually spreading across the world, with the birth of the United Nations and its family of agencies, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, etc. Along with this a range of moral imperatives have evolved and new taboo subjects generated, particularly with the conflation of pederasty and pedophilia, which in their original meanings were two very different constructs.

Ann Elizabeth Mayer in her book *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics*, compares Islamic law with international human rights laws and concludes that these two are not compatible. This she attributes to the belief that Islam is divinely commanded by Allah, and criticising it is considered blasphemous.²⁰

The author goes onto state:

"Islamic 'human rights' can offer no means for protecting the individual against state-approved Islamic laws and policies that violate international human rights laws."

Thus, Muslim theocratic states exist by asserting Islamic law over secular humanitarian law at the possible cost of freedoms of their citizens, female and male.

¹⁸ *The irresistible beauty of boys – Middle Eastern attitudes about boy love*, Maartin Schild, essay, (1980's date unknown), source unknown

¹⁹ *Boy love in the Urdu Ghazal*, Tariq Rahman, *Paidika*, Summer 1989, Vol. 2, No.1

²⁰ *Gay Afghanistan, after the Taliban – homosexuality as tradition*, Richard Ammon, Maura Reynolds, Lou Chibbaro, February 2002, <http://www.globalgayz.com/g-afghanistan2.html>

Culture, tradition, religious beliefs, terminology, orientalism, language, and law all clash on the boundaries of “illicit sex” in Afghanistan. So, in the cultural context of Afghanistan, who is defined as a “boy”, and who is defined as an “adult”. For the Taliban, this was not so much around biological age, but in terms of the ability to grow a beard. But this definition has a long historical tradition, hence the term “beardless youth”.

An interesting article appeared in the Gay and Lesbian Review in their March-April 2003 edition²¹ following a number of articles in the Western media which explores the inappropriateness of the use of Western terminology (gay, homosexual, closet) in these articles, and how they actually confuse the issues, and could make implementing strategies to address risk and vulnerability in terms of HIV (never mind address male sexual abuse and exploitation), extremely problematic. ORA’s conflation of pederasty with homosexuality in its 2005 report is an example of this.

The articles and essays that reported on this issue, describe a whole subterranean culture, visible, yet invisible, where often older men who access adolescent males are married with children, where “possessing” a “beautiful beardless boy” is a mark of status, power and money, where sometimes such boys are exchanged as favours and patronage with financial transactions engaged, expensive gifts and money given to favoured boys, where at times poverty drives such young adolescents to engage in such sexual encounters with older men, and where for some older men, apart from actual desire and longing for the “beautiful boy”, sexual access to females is extremely circumscribed in a gender segregated society where women are socially policed, and where access to young males is so easy.

5. Male adolescent sexual exploitation and abuse

In the ORA Kabul study of high-risk populations,²² it had the following anecdote: *Asghari is a school student of class 7. When he was between 4 and 5 years old his father died and his mother remarried. Asghari went to live with his grandmother who asked him to begin collecting wood to sell to pay for his upkeep. Asghari found the job very difficult: “Some people were giving me money and started to sexually use me. I was happy with that because it was the easiest way to have money for my grandmother. Now it is my business, even if it is shameful. If there is an other alternative, I will stop it.”*

"I was only 14-years-old when a former Uzbek commander forced me to have sex with him," said Shir Mohammad in Sar-e Pol province. "Later, I quit my family and became his secretary. I have been with him for 10 years, I am now grown up, but he still loves me and I sleep with him."
Afghan boy dancers sexually abused by former warlords, Reuters, 18/11/07

A Pashtun tribesman [42] who fell in love with and "married" a 16-year-old boy faces summary execution in Pakistan after his "unholy union" provoked outrage among Islamic leaders.
Afghan tribesman faces death for wedding to teenage boy, Sydney Morning Herald, 7/10/2005

Another owner forced his 14-year-old boy to speak, although he would not give his name. "I was dancing last night," he said, looking exhausted. "I have been doing this for the past year. I have no choice -I'm poor. My father is dead, and this is the only source of income for me and my family. I try to dance well, especially at huge parties. The men throw money at me, and then I gather it up. Sometimes they take me to the market and buy me nice clothes."
Dancing boys of the north, Afghan Press Monitor, October, 2007

A 14-year old boy was arrested on a charge of pederasty, allegedly spending 6 months as a passive sodomite with a man in a nearby village. The boy claims that he was threatened by the man with a pistol and forced to go and stay with him. The man has been released on bail but the boy remains in the correction centre. The police and the attorney say that the case will be finalised according to law as soon as possible.

²¹ *Kandahar: Closely Watched Pashtuns – a Critique of Western Journalists’ Reporting Bias about ‘Gay Kandahar’, Brian James Baer, Gay and Lesbian Review, March-April 2003*

²² *Survey of groups at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS in Kabul, ORA International, April 2005*

Justice for Children – the situation for children in conflict with the law in Afghanistan, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, working draft, January 2008

“...wine made him obedient to all my wishes...”

Ibn al ‘Abbar (d.1041 C.E.) [Source: A.R. Nykl, Hispano-Arabic Poetry and its Relation with the Old Provençal Troubadours – Baltimore: J.H.Furst, 1946, pp 110-1]²³

Despite the proclamations of many *bachaboz* that their man-boy relationships are based on desire and mutuality and are not abusive or exploitative, this does not stand up under scrutiny. In a culture of masculine power dynamics that define masculinity as penetrative, and thus is not lost if a man penetrates another male, especially a boy, where sexual access to women can be extremely limited, where poverty and unemployment is so extensive, where there is a strong phallic culture expressed through the gun, sexual exploitation and abuse of adolescent males will be relatively common, whether it is within a context of *bachabozlik* or not. How can a young male be said to choose to have receptive sex with man because of his poverty? How can such a male say no to a more powerful adult man who may carry a gun, or demonstrates local status and power?

The issue is that there is no clear documentary evidence of the extent of the issue, even though the above quotes indicate a phenomenon that appears to be wide-spread.

6. Gender performance and other patterns of male-male sex

While most of the articles discussed above reflect a pattern of man-boy sexual encounters and relationships, there are a couple that hint at other dynamics of male-male sex.

However, in all the other documentation reviewed for this report, there was no mention of different frameworks of male-male sex and sexualities, other than *bacha bareesh*.

“...Sometimes, he explained, they ‘dress him like a woman’...”

“...involved relationships between grown men...rather than a man with a youth...”

“...You like homosex?...”

Gay Afghanistan: homoeroticism among Kabul’s warriors – Gay City News, New York, April 29 – May 5, 2004

“...We even found in Kabul that some of the younger *bacha baazis* [in the late teens] were very interested in being top with older Western guys who wouldn't normally be viewed as sex objects in the West. A number of Western guys over the last three years going in and out of Kabul played bottom to enthusiastic young Afghans. Sometimes the Westerner would "accommodate" as many as 3 or 4 Afghan tops in a single night. Sometimes the tops would watch each other perform, and sometimes that was not allowed...”

Personal correspondence with GlobalGayz – the ‘secret sex life of warlords and their trophy boys’, November 2006

“...have sex with boys or effeminate men is actually a social norm...”

Boys of the Taliban, FrontPageMazagine.com. January 1, 2007

“...They are dressed in women's clothes, have bells on their feet and have artificial breasts...”

Afghan boy dancers sexually abused by former warlords, Reuters, 18 November 2007

“...I am used to it. I love my lord. I love to dance and act like a woman and play with my owner [17 year old]

Afghan boy dancers sexually abused by former warlords, Reuters, 18 November 2007

²³ *The irresistible beauty of boys – Middle Eastern attitudes about boy love*, Maartin Schild, essay, (1980’s date unknown), source unknown

And finally:

‘...desire to act out feminised roles in dress, dance and behaviour), but had very limited opportunities due to lack of privacy and space, fear of discovery, psychological distress and on non-acceptance...spoke of dancing boys, but stated that these were from a different network, with whom they don’t mix...’

Interviews with 3 self-identified adult MSM in Mazār-i-Sharif , from Shivananda Khan’s notes, August 2008

We see two primary dynamics here:

- Age structured
- Gender performance

While this is little enough evidence to define the differing frameworks of male-to-male sex and practice in Afghanistan, inferences can be drawn from studies conducted across South Asia (Bangladesh, India Nepal, and Pakistan) along with reports from the Middle-East.

And in all of these countries, the two primary patterns of male-male sex are based on age differentiation – the “beardless youth”, and gender performance of one of the partners, whose primary sense of self is around feminisation and receptivity in anal sex. The penetrating partner perceives himself as a man because he does what a man does – penetrate. His sense of self is not dishonoured because of his sexual involvement with other males. Dishonour lies with the man being receptive. Boys and feminised males are not men.

7. So who is MSM?

South Asian populations tend to be very male dominated societies, where social and public spaces are primarily male “owned”. As homosocial and homoaffectionalist²⁴ (Afghanistan is no different) societies, sexual boundaries between males can often be easily crossed in appropriate spaces and become sexualised. Further, significant numbers of males perform gendered roles as feminised males and can be accessed by those deemed as “real men”. Experience indicates that male-to-male sexual behaviours do exist in South Asia countries at substantial levels.

Most of these male-to-male sexual behaviours do not exist within a socio-sexual context of a heterosexual/homosexual oppositional binary and as exclusive categories. Rather, there appears to be an inclusive behaviour, which involves a substantial level of males operating within a wide variety of categories and/or networks. These involve at times, gendered self-identities, a perceived ‘body heat’ leading to a perceived urgent need for semen discharge, ready and easy accessibility to male sexual partners, and the social contexts of gender segregation, social policing of females, delayed marriage, and concepts of masculinity and femininity.

In addition, the fact is that in South Asian cultures the word “man” is socially constructed and usually does not refer to the biological age of a male person. Further many feminised males involved in male-to-male sexual behaviours do not identify themselves as men (or even male). Gender performance, social obligations, marital status, existence of facial hair, define manhood (and thus adulthood).

Male-to-male sex then includes those who do, or do not, identify with same-sex sexual desire, often through gendered sex roles, as well as those who do not. It involves biologically adult males, as well as adolescent males. If we only address MSM based on identity/sexual orientation, then what happens to those males whose sexual behaviours with other males are outside the purview of such frameworks because they do not see themselves possessing a sexual orientation other than a normative masculinity as men?²⁵

²⁴ In South Asian countries, gender segregation of social spaces is a strong form of social policing of gender relationships. Primary relations are between the same gender (homosocial). Homoaffectionalism in the sense that the term is used in this text means social acceptance of the public display of male-to-male or female-to-female affection. For example, it is common in Afghanistan to see two males holding hands or arms wrapped around each other as they walk. Often male friends will also share beds when sleeping, wrapping themselves around each other. (See Hardman: 1993; Also Khan: 1996, where he points out that the boundary between homoaffectionalism and homosexual behaviours is very “thin” particularly in shared spaces and “under the blanket.”)

²⁵ See: *The risks of categorisation*, Shivananda Khan, Pukaar, Issue 21 April 1998; Varieties of homosexuality in Bangladesh, paper presented by Dr. Carol Jenkins at the 12th World AIDS Conference, Geneva, June 28-July 3, 1998, Pukaar, Issue 24, January 1999; *Men and HIV: sociocultural constructions of male sexual behaviours in South Asia*,

To attempt to reduce this complexity will just lead to a greater invisibility of many divergent contexts of male to male sexual behaviours, expressed in an often bewildering variety and range of personal identities, behaviours, gender identifications and practices, which defy such a simple categorisation. In this context, and from the reality of experience in South Asia, Euro-American understandings and discourses on “gay identities”, heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, or even the term “sexual minorities”, if not MSM itself, will be misleading.

Contemporary research on sexualities and genders have clearly shown that the bipolar categories, such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ or ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’, are not useful to describe the range of identities, desires and practices existing in India. The terms “gay” or “homosexual” are too contextualised by a specific history, geography, language, and culture to have any significant usefulness in a different culture from their source. In this we should be talking about sexualities, genders, and at the least, homosexualities and heterosexualities, and about behavioural constructions. Where UNAIDS and others speak of behaviourally homosexual, we can also talk about behaviourally heterosexual in the South Asian context.

Whereas some of the male to male sexual acts could perhaps be called ‘homosexual’ (within the context of a local sexuality based upon a feminised gender identification - in that a sexual sense of self is operating within a framework of gendered sex roles and desires, a significant majority of the male sexual partners of these *males* should be seen within a context of semen discharge rather than desire for another male. But it should also be recognised that within a gendered construct of male-to-male sex and desire, there are masculine men who form emotional and sexual relationships with these feminised males. These masculine men do not see themselves (nor are they perceived as such) as homosexuals, but rather as “real men”, defined by their supposedly exclusive penetrating role that they take in the sexual encounter with a feminised male. “Beardless youth” falls in this category, for they are not men.

Thus what does exist in South Asia are a range of masculinities and genders with differing contextualisation of sexual behaviours, sex partner choices, perceived sexual needs, pleasures and desires, where male-to-male sex is seen primarily within a gendered dynamic, rather than in terms of sexual orientation or identity. This means that for many who could be categorised as MSM would not define themselves as such because they would see themselves as normative penetrative males.

In that sense we should look at male-to-male behaviours, not through the prism of a binary gender system of male/female, or through the prism of a binary sexuality of heterosexuality/homosexuality, but through a trinary system of man/not-man/woman. In this framework, then, “beardless boys” and feminised males fit the category of “not-man”.

Sexually accessing masculine partners by feminised males is not considered difficult. All urban areas appear to have sexualised spaces, such as parks, toilets, railway and bus stations, specific bazaars, streets, and other public areas where *such males* would go to meet potential *partners*, often marketing sexual availability through their feminised social behaviours. Many ‘real men’ also go to these sites, not only to meet such accessible males, but often for quite legitimate purposes, where they can get caught up “in the heat of the moment” and access feminised males there at the time.

These networks of differing MSM contexts may at times inter-penetrate, where individuals may shift along differing networks, but usually they are mutually exclusive. In other words there are complex dynamics and diffusion in relation of male-to-male sex.

In a range of workshops conducted by NFI across South Asia, the question was asked as to why males have sex with other males, and across the board the same responses were generated:

- Desire for other males – gender/orientation
- Desire for male beauty
- Desire for specific acts – anal/oral
- Pleasure and enjoyment from discharge – “body heat” – also play and curiosity
- Wives do not do anal or oral sex – ashamed to ask

Shivananda Khan, Pukaar, Issue 28, January 2000; *Males who have sex with males in South Asia – a kothi framework*, Pukaar, Issue 31, October 2000. Pukaar is the quarterly journal of Naz Foundation International and available on its website www.nfi.net

- Males are easier to access –females are more socially policed and can be more difficult to access
- Protecting a girls virginity – maintaining chastity
- For money, employment, favours
- Anus is tighter than vagina and gives more pleasure
- No marriage involvement
- Its not real sex

It's not really sex? What did this mean? It appears that for many men in the region, non penile-vaginal sexual practices are not defined as sex, but rather, as in India, defined as “play”, or to use the Hindi term *masti*, which means mischief.

To a significant extent it is the penetrated male that is subjected to the perception of deviancy and thus of abuse. This perception is further reinforced by the socio-cultural realities of invisibilization of sexual behaviors, gender segregation, social policing of women, an acceptability of male homo-sociality and homo-affectualism, masculine dominance over public spaces and discourse, a culture of shame where family, community respect and honor hold sway, compulsory and arranged marriage, the social pressure for reproduction (particularly of male children), understanding of sex only in its reproductive sense, joint and extended families, and the negation of the self before the community/family.

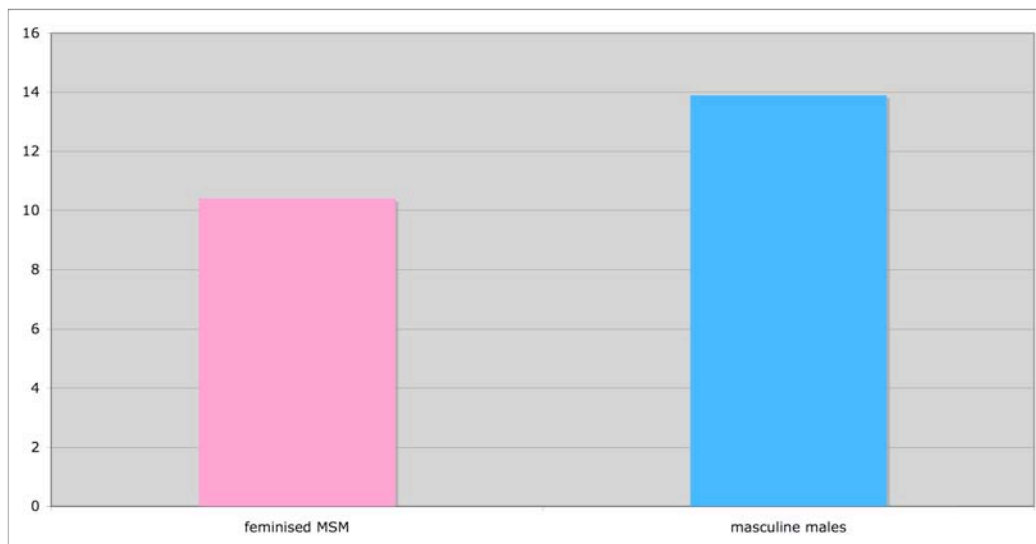
Afghanistan appears to display many of the socio-cultural-sexual characteristics described above.

8. Sexual debut

As is evidence by the body of literature regarding the practice of *bacabozlik*, early sexual debut and adolescent male sexual exploitation appears to be not uncommon. What documentary evidence exists is that substantively, many of these “beardless youths” are sexually initiated between 12 to 16 years.

However, in a study on social constructions of masculinity in Bangladesh (also a Muslim country)²⁶ among young men it was found that early sexual debut appeared to be normative:

Sexual debut (mean)



This was a reconfirmation of an earlier study conducted in Bangladesh among feminised MSM²⁷

²⁶ *In their own words: the formulation of sexual and health-related behaviours among young men in Bangladesh*, NFI/Catalyst Consortium, 2005

²⁷ *Sex, secrecy and shamefulness: developing a sexual health response to the needs of males who have sex with males in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, Shivananda Khan, NFI, 1997

Age of sexual debut (N=500)

Age	%
5--10	19.25
11--14	46.23
15--18	32.64
above 18	1.88

Gender of first sexual partner

Gender	%
male	86.41
female	13.59

Age of first sexual partner

Age	%
14-16	13.21
17-21	21.13
22-30	40.28
31-45	18.30
above 45	6.98

Relationship to first sex partner

Relationship	%
friend	21.89
neighbour	15.47
relative	50.00
stranger	12.64

This is not to state that the situation is the same in Afghanistan, but it could possibly point to similar dynamics in a culture with strict gender segregation and a pervasive societal norm of sexual activities with male adolescents.

9. Male sex work

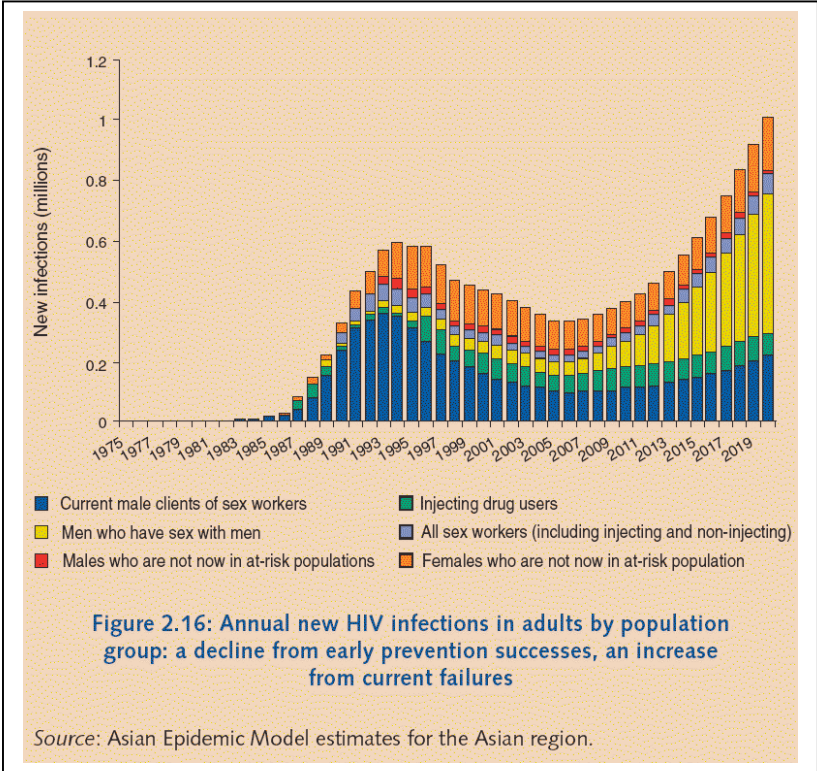
While there appears to be no literature currently available, on male sex work in Afghanistan, its existence in major urban areas can be inferred by the various articles identified above where there is mention of gifts and money. This author confirms that the discussions he had had with three self-identified MSM (feminised adult males), all stated that they were involved in sex work, as well as relationships with a regular male partner.

10. Cross-cutting issues

As the data identified previously in this report regarding injecting drug users show, there is considerable cross-over between IDU and male-to-male sex. How many of these IDU users were also involved in male sex work as a means to earn money to purchase drugs was not known.

This is particularly worrisome as studies conducted in various countries indicate that it is this particular porous boundary between two highly at-risk populations that are significant in driving the HIV epidemic, and that while epidemics often start amongst injecting drug users, they rapidly jump into MSM sexual

networks and female sex workers and their clients.²⁸ However, as the Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia’s report ²⁹also states from all the evidence available, that it is unlikely that these routes of transmission within and between these three key highly at-risk populations is unlikely to spread and become a major epidemic amongst the general population. But the report goes on to state that unless effective HIV prevention, treatment, care and support interventions are implemented, particularly in relationship to MSM, then in all likelihood, there will be a annual doubling of HIV prevalence over the next few years. In other words, without an increase in effective, comprehensive and carefully targeted HIV interventions, the highest number of new infections will soon be among MSM, which will outnumber other single sub-population groups in Asia. That number will increase dramatically until 2020, at which time nearly 50% of all new infections in Asia will be among men who have sex with men, as illustrated below from the AIDS Commission Report:



Another contentious issue, as many of the above-identified articles on male-to-male behaviours in Afghanistan identified was the marital status of many of the older males involved. In fact, socio-culturally in Afghanistan, arranged marriages are the norm, and it would not be surprising that adult MSM, whether feminised or not, would also be married, or going to get married.

This situation leads to the significant possibility of those involved in male-to-male sexual activities within a high risk environment of HIV/STI infections transmitting the infection (s) to their wives, and/or other female partners (if they are also accessing female sex workers).

11. Numerical perversity

“...The problem is so widespread that the government has issued a directive barring "beardless boys"- a euphemism for under-age sex partners - from police stations, military bases and commanders' compounds.” *Shh, it's an open secret: warlords and pedophilia, New York Times, 21 February 2002*

²⁸ *Redefining AIDS in Asia: crafting an effective response*, Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia, Oxford University Press, 2008

²⁹ *Ibid*

"Ninety percent of men have the desire to commit this sin," the mullah says. "But most are right with God and exercise control. Only 20 to 50% of those who want to do this actually do it."
Kandahar's lightly veiled homosexual habits, Los Angeles Times, 3 April 2002

It's not only religious authorities who describe homosexual sex as common among the Pushtun. Dr. Mohammed Nasem Zafar, a professor at Kandahar Medical College, estimates that about 50% of the city's male residents have sex with men or boys at some point in their lives. He says the prime age at which boys are attractive to men is from 12 to 16 - before their beards grow in. The adolescents sometimes develop medical problems, which he sees in his practice, such as sexually transmitted diseases and sphincter incontinence...

Zafar, the doctor, says that in the community at large the Taliban frightened many men into abstinence. "Under the Taliban, no more than 10% practiced homosexual sex," he says. "But now the government isn't paying attention, so it may go back up to 50%."
Kandahar's lightly veiled homosexual habits, Los Angeles Times, 3 April 2002

"This practice has such a long history in this province that local people treat it as a respected custom..."
Dancing boys of the north, Afghan Press Monitor, October 2007

While these quotes do not purport to give any size estimation are indicative of what appears to be a significant number of males/men involved in male-to-male.

Counting numbers is the name of the game for donors, policy makers, and government institutions in the field of HIV programming and funding. How many? What do they do? Where? However this approach requires a Linnaeus approach to categorization, classification and reduction to the lowest common denominator, particularly when it is bound within a binary system of sexuality based on this or that. If it does not fit then it does not exist. A form of numerical perversity exists and an HIV triage rules the stage.

As discussed above male-to-male sex as a category is highly complex, diverse, and for many significantly gendered which makes it extremely difficult to make any effective size estimations. Simplifying this complex scenario, it is composed of two or more populations; those that may be relatively visible and those invisibilised because such males are a part of the normative male population.

At the same time, the issue of who is being defined as MSM is extremely pertinent. Should two males who only mutually masturbate each other be defined as MSM? Does a single male-to-male sexual encounter define the participants as MSM? Indeed, how frequently does a male have to sex with another male to be defined as MSM? Should risk to HIV infection be taken into account?

Behavioral surveillance studies are often problematic, inadequate and poorly designed. These studies are plagued by procedural and ethical issues such as where inappropriate questioning is the norm, poor formatting of studies, lack of confidentiality, stigmatization by researchers, or no mention of same-sex relations. This paucity in information and knowledge is further compounded by a lack of understanding of the dynamics and frameworks of same-sex behaviors in a South Asia context.

This leads to a lack of sensitivity to the realities of male-to-male sex which can often further exclude many MSM from service provision, treatment and care, as well as significantly underestimate the number of at-risk MSM in any given population along with a lack of resources to support HIV intervention programmes.

The qualitative and quantitative studies regarding MSM in any given population depends very much on the sensitivity of the methodology used, who conducts such studies, how they are conducted, and the groups of males being accessed.

In Pakistan, AIDS Analysis Asia, reported in July 1996³⁰ that:
20% of men in one rural area have male-to-male sex

³⁰ Reported in *AIDS Analysis, Asia*, July 1996, Focus on Pakistan, page 6.

40% of men living in a Karachi squatter settlement had male-to-male sex
72% of truck drivers in central Karachi had sex with other males, while 76% had sex with female sex workers

In Bangladesh (another Muslim country, like Pakistan), in an NFI situational assessment in Sylhet in 2000³¹ where 200 feminised MSM were interviewed, that they reported an average of 11 different sexual partners a week.

Similar levels were reported in other cities, where most of these sexual partners are so-called normative males. While these figures may well be to some extent exaggerated by respondents in the studies, there is a clear indication of considerable male-male sexual activity.

It appears then that in the socio-sexual cultural framework in South Asian countries, it is almost impossible to get an accurate size estimation of the numbers of MSM in any given locality nor the levels of those who are most risk.

This is because of the prevalent concepts of masculinity and gendered dynamics of so much of male-to-male sex, the act of penetration itself is seen as an act of masculinity and manliness, not of homosexuality. Gender segregation, lack of access to females, along with socio-cultural dynamics of homoaffectionalism, homosocial behaviours, and male bonding, along with the range of all-male institutions such as prisons, hostels, and armed forces increases the difficulty.

Class, economic deprivation, mobility, gendered identities, and a range of other factors need all to be taken into account, and this has not been done. This means that in these countries what estimates do exist are grossly under-reported.

It has been estimated that between 3% to 20% of all men are estimated to have sex with other men at least once in their lives in parts of Asia (*Caceres CF et al. 2005: Estimating the number of men who have sex with men in low and middle countries. Sexual Transmission Infection Journal 82 -Suppl III*). In a north India study conducted by Dr Ravi Verma of Population Council (*AIDS 2004: 18. 1845-1856*), findings indicated that 10% of single men, and 3% of married men had unprotected anal sex with another male in the past year, while in the same study it was reported that MSM often had more female partners than other men, and they practice anal sex in 11% of their heterosexual contacts.

National or other representative samples of males throughout the world usually find between 5 and 20 percent have had sex with another male some time in their lives, although in certain countries proportions were higher. However, the proportion of males who report recent male-to-male sex within the past year or past 6 months is always considerably lower, ranging from 2 to 10 percent, or approximately half.

Based on figures quoted by Caceres above, the male population between 15-64 years of age of 8,901,880 identified in the section on socio-economic information above, and taking a conservative estimate of 4% of this figure, would give a possible size estimation of MSM in Afghanistan of some 356,075.

Could this be an indication of the level of male-male sex in Afghanistan?

12. Attitudes

In *Islamic Homosexualities – culture, history and literature*³² Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, along with eight other authors, analyse the sexual shadows of Islam. One reviewer, Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum in Philadelphia wrote the following appraisal of the book:³³

³¹ *Situational assessment of sexual health among males who have sex with males and their sexual partners in Sylhet, Bangladesh*, NFI, 2000

³² *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature*, edited by Stephen O'Murray and Will Roscoe, 1997, New York University Press

³³ Quoted from *Gay Afghanistan after the Taliban*. February 2002, www.globalgayz.com/g-afghanistan2.html

"As with so much else in the sexual realm, Islamic norms differ profoundly from Western ones. The authors establish several points: (1) Islam treats homosexuality far less harshly than does Judaism or Christianity. (2) Sex between men results in part from the segregation of women and in part from the poetic and folk heritage holding that the penetration of a pretty boy is the ultimate in sexual delight. (3) Sex between men is "frowned upon, but accepted" so long as the participants also marry and have children; and also if they keep quiet about this activity. (4) The key distinction is not hetero vs. homosexual but active vs. passive; men are expected to seek penetration (with wives, prostitutes, other males, animals); the only real shame is attached to serving in the female role. (5) Youths usually serve in the female role and can leave behind this shame by graduating to the male role. (6) The great Muslim emphasis on family life renders homosexuality far less threatening to Muslim societies than to Western ones (Muslim men seeking formally to marry each other remains unimaginable)."

Islamic Homosexualities also speaks of the construction of honour as the public transgression of morals that is condemned, not so much the condemnation of social transgressions themselves. Islamic law requires eyewitnesses to convict someone of certain moral "crimes". As long as men conform to a role that is honoured (being a husband or a father) that illicit activities may be tolerate as long as these are invisibilised.

From *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*³⁴ it is stated:

"Existing discourses on sexuality in Islam often fails to consider the differences in practice among Muslim communities. They also tend to overlook the areas of negotiability created by social taboos and silences related to sexual behaviour. Nonetheless, even discourses based on an analysis of the Koran and the literature traditionally accepted to establish the normative practices of Islam can lead to contradictory conclusions about the construction of women's sexuality [and men's sexuality]...

...As in many other cultures, the social construction of gender differences in Islam derives from a hypothesis of women's and men's allegedly "fundamental" biological, psychological and social-sexual differences. As Abdelwahab Boudhiba notes, the "Islamic view of the bipolarity of the world rests on the strict separation of the two "orders" – the feminine and the masculine (*Boudhiba, Sexuality and Islam: London, Saqi Books, 1998*). Anything that violates this order of the world is a grave disorder, a source of evil and anarchy. Social order, therefore, requires male control of women's bodies and sexuality. Female sexuality, if uncontrolled, could lead to social chaos (*fitna*). As such, one's sex is a crucial factor in determining the kinds of "protection" that have to be employed against social disorder...

"...is the conflation between 'Islamic' and 'Muslim'. Islam is the religion or faith (the way of *Allah*), while Muslims are those who believe in Islam and attempt to practice it. Islam is an issue of theology. However, what Muslims (human fallible people) make of Islam is an arena open to social scientific inquiry. In other words, how human beings understand and apply Islam in their contemporary realities and daily lives can be seen to be often contentious (or at least an area of debate). This is so not only in the present but also throughout the past history of Muslim communities. The recognition that Islamic and Muslim are not synonyms is important because it helps avoid essentialising Islam and reifying it as an a-historic, disembodied ideal which is more or less imperfectly actualised in this or that community. It also refuses to privilege the dominant discourses of one particular Muslim community at one particular times over all others hence avoiding essentialising the histories of Muslim communities.

"...Similarly, the development of various schools of *sharia* testifies that there is diverse understanding about how Islam should be practices. The Hanafi, Hambali, Mailki and Sha'afi schools of Sunni *sharia* as well as the Shi'a school provide differing understandings of Islamic legal opinion, all of which are Muslim [*not to forget Sufi and Ishmaili traditions as well*]

"Essentialising "Islamic societies" ignores the real existence of a multiplicity of ways of being Muslim. Amongst all the possibilities who can authorise 'essential Islam'? This question hence

³⁴ *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, edited by Pinar Ilkkaracan, published by Women for Women's Human Rights, Istanbul, Turkey, 2000

directs attention to the power relations in Muslim communities – who has the power to define and enforce particular ways of being good Muslims – including dealing with the sexualities of Muslims?”

From *Male homosexuality in the Arab world*, Amman Radio Online, 30 July 1998:

Many Arab men make a distinction between sex and emotional attachment. Bruce Dunne, author of an article titled *Power and Sexuality in the Middle East*³⁵ believes that sexual relations in the Middle East are about power. He writes “Sexual relations in Middle Eastern societies have historically articulated social hierarchies that is dominant and subordinate social positions: adult men on top; women, boys and slaves below. Both dominate/subordinate and heterosexual/homosexual categorisations are structures of power.”

From *Power and sexuality in the Middle East*, Bruce Dunne, Middle East Report, Spring 1998

...Where men rule, sexes are segregated, male and family honour is linked to premarital female virginity and sex is licit only within marriage or concubinage. Those denied access to licit sexuality for whatever reasons--youth, poverty, occupation (e.g. soldiers), demographic sexual imbalances--require other sexual outlets. Such contradictions between normative morality and social realities supported both male and female prostitution and same-sex practices in Middle Eastern societies from the medieval to the modern period. Ruling authorities saw prostitution as a socially useful alternative to potential male sexual violence (e.g. against respectable women) and a welcome source of tax revenues, even as some religious scholars vigorously objected. According to Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, "institutional prostitution forms part of the secret equilibrium of Arabo-Muslim societies," necessary to their social reproduction.

...Explains the relation between gender roles and sexual roles in medieval Muslim societies by locating them in, respectively, distinct public and private realms. Adult men, who dominated their wives and slaves in private, controlled the public realm. Sex with boys or male prostitutes made men "sinners," but did not undermine their public position as men or threaten the important social values of female virginity or family honor. Women, who could not penetrate and were confined to the private realm, were largely irrelevant to conceptions of gender; female homoeroticism received little attention. Effeminate men who voluntarily and publicly behaved as women (mukhannaths) gave up their claims to membership in the dominant male order. They "lost their respectability [as men] but could be tolerated and even valued as entertainers"-poets, musicians, dancers, singers. Men who maintained a dominant public persona but were privately submissive threatened presumptions of male dominance and were vulnerable to challenge.

Sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, continue to be understood as relations of power linked to rigid gender roles. In Turkey, Egypt and the Maghrib, men who are "active" in sexual relations with other men are not considered homosexual; the sexual domination of other men may even confer a status of hyper-masculinity. The anthropologist Malek Chebel, describing the Maghrib as marked by an "exaggerated machismo," claims that most men who engage in homosexual acts are functional bisexuals; they use other men as substitutes for women--and have great contempt for them. He adds that most Maghribis would consider far worse than participation in homosexual acts the presence of love, affection or equality among participants. Equality in sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, threatens the "hyper-masculine" order.

Guns and roses?

With regard to current social attitudes in Afghanistan:

“...Even the parents of the boys know in their hearts the nature of the relationship, but will tell people that their son is working for the man...”

³⁵ *Power and Sexuality in the Middle East*, Bruce Dunne, Middle East Report Spring 1998, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer206/bruce.htm>

Kandahar comes out of the closet, Times of London, 12 January 2002

Most men here spend the vast majority of their time in the company of other men and rarely glimpse more than the feet of any woman other than their mother, sister or wife. The atmosphere leaves little room for romantic love, let alone recreational sex between men and women. But alternative opportunities are not hard to find.

Shh, it's an open secret: warlords and pedophilia, New York Times, 21 February 2002

"How can you fall in love with a girl if you can't see her face?" he asks.

...is unmarried and has sex only with men and boys. But he does not consider himself homosexual, at least not in the Western sense. "I like boys, but I like girls better," he says. "It's just that we can't see the women to see if they are beautiful. But we can see the boys, and so we can tell which of them is beautiful."

"I would like to get married, but the economic situation in our country makes it hard,"

"These are hard questions you are asking," he says. "We don't usually talk about such things."

Kandahar's lightly veiled homosexual habits, Los Angeles Times, 3 April 2002

The city with the greatest reputation for active homosexuality was Kandahar, the headquarters of the Taliban. According to M., male couples "were even holding wedding ceremonies after the Taliban arrived." The Taliban tried to control it, he explained, but "it was so common in Kandahar, they were able to embrace it."

Gay Afghanistan: homoeroticism among Kabul's warriors, Gay City News, 29 April-5 May 2004

These comments appear to indicate a significant level of social tolerance (not so much acceptance), with recognition of the illicitness of the behaviour. An open secret, partly because there has not been any significant level of arrests or those engaged in this practice, partly because other dynamics of male-male sexual practices are invisibilised, and partly because of current Afghanistan power politics between the government and law enforcement agencies, with previous and current warlords and their localized power.

13. Socio-legal situation

Male-male sex is defined as illicit in Islamic thought and in *Sharia* law is condemned by death. While Afghanistan defines itself as an Islamic Republic, it has reinstated the 1976 Penal Code.

Chapter Eight: Adultery, Pederasty, and Violations of honour

Article 427: (1) "A person who commits adultery or pederasty shall be sentenced to long imprisonment.

(2) In one of the following cases commitment of the acts specified above, is considered to be aggravating conditions:

a. In the case where the person against whom the crime has been committed is not yet eighteen years old.

b. ..."

Note that the Islamic *Sharia* law, criminalising homosexual acts within a maximum of death penalty, is applied together with the codified Penal law. However, no death sentences have been handed out after the end of Taliban rule, although it is technically possible.

Source: State-sponsored homophobia – a world survey of laws prohibiting same sex activities between consenting adults, ILGA report, April 2007

The author had asked Dr Bargami, Programme Manager of Vulnerable Populations within NACP if he could identify the current legal framework which he kindly provided, 28 August, 2008:

Sodomy: Prohibited in *Sharia*, constitutional law, and in custom.

Punishment in Sharia: The punishment for this action is not mentioned clearly in the Quran but the penal courts are authorised to give a range of punishment (from short detention to killing under wall)

Punishment in Law: Exact punishment is not mentioned and court is authorised for detention of the offenders for short medium and long term.

Punishment in Culture: Keeping at home as prisoners and in some most conservative tribes killing (killing for honour)

Bacha bazi: Prohibited in Sharia, constitutional law and in custom.

Punishment in Shareat: No specified punishment and the Qazi is authorised to give punishment according to the condition of offenders.

Punishment in Law: No specified punishment and court is authorised to give punishment according to the condition of offenders (short detention)

Punishment in Culture: No specific regulation different punishment for different tribes are given

14. Issues arising

14.1 Adolescent male sexual exploitation

The documentation reviewed above clearly identifies that within Afghanistan there is a significant sexual cultural framework that involves adolescent males in sexual exploitation by older men, and that there appears to be a degree of social tolerance of this behaviour. Despite its historicity and traditionalism in the country, the impact of Afghanistan's engagement in the wider world, and the influence of UN agencies in its development, there is a growing recognition by the government that such behaviours are not longer tolerable and should be addressed.

This is further problematised in that such behaviours are intertwined with power dynamics, "guns and roses," that are also linked with political stabilisation in those areas under government control where so-called "commanders" are also involved in these behaviours. It would be difficult for the government and law enforcement agencies to enforce the law in these conditions.

However, the psychological and medical impact of early (and often forceful) sexual debut on these adolescents need to be addressed in appropriate manner that is supportive and not discriminatory.

But a caveat is needed here in that there will be some male adolescents whose gender/sexual orientation is within an MSM framework, and these male adolescents will also require support to recognise their own sexualities in healthy ways.

14.2 Naming the epidemic

UNAIDS, national AIDS programmes, donors, NGOs, and many researchers and HIV and AIDS institutions and organisations tend to name the HIV epidemic as a "heterosexual" or "homosexual", or perhaps one based on intravenous drug use, or "sex workers" (meaning of course female sex workers).

But as so much research has shown, an epidemic primarily driven by behaviours cannot be so clearly defined, when we lack the understanding and knowledge of these behaviours, the extent and context in which they occur, and the meaning and significance which are given to these behaviours by those who "practice" them. Sexual behaviour does not exist in isolation from the individuals who practice them, nor from the socio-cultural context in which they occur.

All these labels are socially constructed, and this includes the term “males who have sex with males”. But too often they do not identify the actual reality of the epidemic. Furthermore, the boundaries between these differing categories are often porous and ‘lines’ of transmission are problematic.

In reducing such complexities to a “heterosexual” or “homosexual” epidemic (as if a sexual identity can transmit a virus), makes it more likely that intervention strategies are poorly developed, inadequately thought through, and inappropriately implemented.

14.3 Naming the behaviour: MSM as a category

Highlighted in the reports reviewed in this document, was that the term MSM – males who have sex with males (in the main, the term used was men who have sex with men) - lacks “coherence in that the term and the dangers in assumptions that are often made in many studies about easily accessed or familiar populations being the main MSM group”.³⁶

Thus the term MSM is often used to define a “group” rather than a sexual practice, which means that many frameworks of male-to-male sex are invisibilised and ignored. This often leads to a erroneous and dangerous assumption that MSM are limited to small self-identified and visible sub-populations, such as gay-identified men, visible male sex workers, and those with feminised behaviours and gendered identities, or *bacha bazi*. What this means is that many studies and resultant programmatic interventions treat MSM as an identity category, rather than a behavioural category.³⁷ As a consequence, very few studies (if any at all) are conducted in regard to the clients of male sex workers, other dynamics of male-to-male sex, or the partners of feminised MSM (or perhaps *bacha bazi* and their partners) who tend to be males from the general male population.³⁸

14.4 Problematizing the MSM construct

Ever since the 19th century’s scientific enterprise of naming and categorising all phenomena as a means to understanding,³⁹ along with the medicalisation of sexual behaviours and practices along with the undercurrent socio-cultural frameworks of religious belief, male-to-male behaviours (and of course, female-to-female behaviours) have been constructed within oppositional categories of homosexuality⁴⁰ and heterosexuality, each exclusive of the other. One had to be one or the other. Bisexuality as a category of behaviour did develop, but only in a limited sense, and with a great deal of confusion attached to it. The lesbian and gay movement with its identity politics in the West, while claiming otherwise, also have, to a significant extent, solidified this exclusive identity-based categorisation. And to a large extent, this thinking still pervades HIV and sexuality discourses and programmes. Similar understandings regarding masculinity and femininity and the attendant gender constructs experience these limitations, where femininity is tied to femaleness, and masculinity to that of maleness.

³⁶ Family Health International, 2002. *A review of knowledge about the sexual networks and behaviours of men who have sex with men in Asia* by Gary Dowsett, Jeffrey Grierson and Stephen McNally, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, LaTrobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Unpublished. This study covered the countries of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Thailand.

³⁷ Personal anecdote: projects providing sexual health services for “MSM”, or conducting research in certain Asian countries spoke of “these MSMs”.

³⁸ Personal observation: when conducting a review of an MSM intervention project in one of the South-East countries for an international agency, I discovered that the education resources discussing the risks of unprotected anal sex focused only on self-identified MSM, but many of their sexual partners came from the general male population, and their HIV/AIDS education only focused on vaginal sex

³⁹ Based on the principle of reductionism – the breaking down of a phenomenon into what is believed to be its constituent parts, and the study of each of its parts separately.

⁴⁰ The word homosexuality was invented in the 1860s to describe the phenomena of what was being termed “inversion” – men who desired other men “as women do”. The invert was defined as a homosexual, who was biologically constructed. The word heterosexual apparently was invented in the 1890s to describe a person who suffered a mental illness and who “unnaturally lusts after women”. Both of these terms came into common usage in the 1920s, where the category heterosexual became normative. See Jonathan Ned Katz, 1996, *The invention of heterosexuality*, Plume Books.

Further usage of western terminology such as homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, gay, transgender, and so on, without problematising their usage in the context of differing cultures and societies, as much research does, creates further barriers to understanding and knowledge.

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) human sexual behaviours and practices do not fit into these tidy categories of separation and exclusive distinction. Its complexity, diversity, and the nature of desire and practice just do not “fit”. Human sexual behaviours and practices are ‘untidy’, perverse, and often polymorphous, as much anthropological studies have shown.

It is clear then, that using the term MSM either as an identity, or even perhaps as a descriptive category, by its nature, often invisibilises the enormous diversity and complexity of male-to-male sex, whatever the country.

We therefore need to stop thinking of MSM as a discrete group and begin to explore the issue of male-to-male sex and practice as a broad socio-cultural-behavioural framework within which are many differing dynamics, contexts, meanings and significances along with varying degrees of risks of infection and transmission. For example, where anal receptivity is the primary sexual activity of certain populations of males who have sex with males, versus those who primarily penetrate, the frequency of partners will vary according to the gender role that is performed, or where female partners are also being accessed as regularly (or irregularly) as male partners.

14.5 Who are MSM?

Male-to-male sex then includes those males who do, or do not, identify with same-sex sexual desire, perhaps through gendered sex roles, as well as those who do not. It involves biologically adult males, as well as adolescent males. If we only address HIV/AIDS risks for MSM based on identity/sexual orientation, then what happens to those males whose sexual behaviours with other males are outside the purview of such frameworks because they do not see themselves possessing a sexual orientation other than a normative masculinity as men?⁴¹

Too attempt to reduce this complexity will just lead to a greater invisibility of many divergent contexts of male to male sexual behaviours, expressed in an often bewildering variety and range of personal identities, behaviours, gender identifications and practices, which defy such a simple categorisation. Contemporary research on sexualities and genders have clearly shown that the bipolar categories, such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ or ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’, are not useful to describe the range of identities, desires and practices⁴². The terms “gay” or “homosexual” are too contextualised by a specific history, geography, language, and culture to have any significant usefulness in a different culture from their source. In this we should be talking about sexualities, genders, and at the least, homosexualities and heterosexualities, and about behavioural constructions. Where UNAIDS and others speak of behaviourally homosexual, we can also talk about behaviourally heterosexual.

Whereas some of the male-to-male sexual acts could perhaps be called ‘homosexual’ (within the context of a local sexuality based upon a feminised gender identification) in that a sexual sense of self is operating within a framework of gendered sex roles and desires, a significant majority of the male sexual partners of these males (along with some of those of adolescent males – *bacha bazi*) could be seen within a context of semen discharge rather than desire for another male. It should also be recognised that within a gendered construct of male-to-male sex and desire, there are some *men* who would form emotional and sexual relationships with feminised males/adolescent males. These men would not see themselves (nor are they perceived as such) as homosexuals, but rather as “real men”, defined by their supposedly exclusive penetrating role that they take in the sexual encounter. In fact it is unlikely they would even perceive

⁴¹ See: *The risks of categorisation*, Shivananda Khan, Pukaar, Issue 21 April 1998; *Varieties of homosexuality in Bangladesh*, paper presented by Dr. Carol Jenkins at the 12th World AIDS Conference, Geneva, June 28-July 3, 1998, Pukaar, Issue 24, January 1999; *Men and HIV: socio-cultural constructions of male sexual behaviours in South Asia*, Shivananda Khan, Pukaar, Issue 28, January 2000; *Males who have sex with males in South Asia – a kothi framework*, Pukaar, Issue 31, October 2000. Pukaar is the quarterly journal of Naz Foundation International and available on its website www.nfi.net

⁴² Personal discussion with Dr. Carol Jenkins, Care Bangladesh, 1999

themselves as “men who have sex with men”. Neither for that matter, would feminised males or adolescent males. Thus in Foreman’s paper for FHI he speaks of “unknown men” or “hidden men”, and “acknowledge men” or “identified men”.⁴³

14.6 Estimation of the numbers of MSM

As discussed above, MSM as a category is highly complex, diverse, and for many significantly gendered, which makes it extremely difficult to make any effective size estimation.

At the same time, the issue of who is being defined as MSM is extremely pertinent. Do two males who only mutually masturbate each other defined as MSM? Does a single male-to-male sexual encounter define the participants as MSM? Indeed, how frequently does a male have to have sex with another male to be defined as MSM? Should risk to HIV infection be taken into account?

Behavioural surveillance and size estimation studies are often problematic, inadequate and badly designed. Many procedural and ethical issues are problematic where inappropriate questioning is the norm, poor formatting of studies, lack of confidentiality, stigmatisation by researchers, or even no mention of same-sex relations. This poverty in information and knowledge is further enhanced through a lack of understanding of the dynamics and frameworks of same-sex behaviours.

This leads to a lack of sensitivity to the realities of male-to-male sex and thus inadequate programming, which can often further socially exclude many MSM from service provision, treatment and care, as well as significantly underestimate the number of at-risk MSM in any given population along with a lack of resources to support HIV intervention programmes.

The qualitative and quantifying studies regarding MSM in any given population depends very much on the sensitivity of the methodology used, who conducts such studies, how they are conducted, and which groups of males are being accessed. Too often, such studies access visible MSM and build their size estimations on that. Perhaps the pertinent question here is, not who is MSM, but rather how many males are involved in a range of unprotected sexual practices, anal, vaginal, or both. How to provide HIV/AIDS prevention services that address these behaviours would then involve identities, sexual networking and vulnerability.

Thus all we are left with is the category of males (or men), participating in differing sexual networks and activities. While some have gendered identities, some with gay identities, and some with other types of sexual identities, thus expressing some self-identity that can be accessed and around which community-based responses may be possible, for many men, their male-to-male sexual behaviours does not revolve around such a gender/sexual identity, or desire for another male, but around the act of a particular type of sex, a behaviour choice.

Perhaps what we may need to do is to begin to think in terms of risky practices and ask the questions who, where, when, why (and perhaps why not?).

14.7 Sexualities, masculinities and gender

MSM is usually an acronym for the phrase “men who have sex with men”, but the category men, in the context of male-to-male sexual behaviours, is also problematic. How is the word ‘men’ being defined? Who is doing the defining? In South Asia countries there are categories of male which are defined as feminine (at the moment no such information from Afghanistan). Such males perceive themselves as ‘woman-like’, ‘a woman in a man’s body’, and so on, and they usually will perform a female gender role, both in dress, mannerisms, and many times sexually. They may cross-dress intermittently, regularly, or even all the time.

⁴³ Family Health International, 2004. *Unknown Men – missing information about men who have sex with men in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand*. Unpublished.

It is also not unknown for such males to take on the penetrating role with another male. At the same time, there are also masculine men, who perform as men, but who at times are sexually penetrated. Thus behaviour and identity may not always be congruent.

What does appear to exist are a range of masculinities and gender variance, with differing contextualisation of sexual behaviours, sex partner choices, perceived sexual needs, pleasures and desires, where male-to-male sex is seen primarily within a gendered dynamic, rather than in terms of sexual orientation or identity. This means that for many who could be categorised as MSM would not define themselves as such because they would see themselves as normative penetrating males, or as males who are not men.

Thus when we discuss gender, we should ensure that males, men, masculinities are part of this discourse. Feminised males and “beardless youth” are as vulnerable to sexual exploitation, violence, harassment and rape as women, and usually for the same reasons. Their vulnerability may well be higher, because of the double stigma of crossing gender boundaries, and being anally penetrated.

14.8 Female sexual health

Apart from the issue of the distinction between MSM as an imposed identity category and MSM as a behavioural category, the issue of female sexual health concerns arising from male-to-male sexual behaviours appears to be rarely considered. If male-to-male sex is seen as behaviour, and within cultures that reinforce concepts of masculinity and have strong cultural and social values around marriage, reproduction, and lineage, then sex with female partners is most probable. This is also heightened in cultures that strongly support marriage as socially compulsory and family duty.

14.9 Discrete categories

Another concern that must be taken into account is that by categorising “groups at risk” or even “populations at risk” as discrete and exclusive groups, such as MSM, IDUs, migrant populations, and occupational groups, means that cross-over behaviours are often ignored. Thus there are MSM who are sex workers, who inject drugs, who migrate, who also are a part of occupational groups, and so on. And similarly there are male IDUs who have sex with males, who sell sex, who migrate, and who also belong to occupational groups.

These concerns also make modelling the contribution that male-to-male sexual behaviours might make on the HIV epidemics in these countries, apart from increasing the difficulties in understanding MSM sexual cultures. Further, as a consequence, size estimations of “the MSM population” become extremely problematic.

14.10 Groups, networks, and individuals

And of course there are significant levels of males who are not a part of any sexual network or group as such, who access male partners in neighbourhoods, schools, colleges, prisons, work settings, and in the uniformed services, regularly or irregularly basis, perhaps ad-hoc, and with a discharge focus, where perceive sexual need, immediacy and accessibility are the significant factors. Such partnering may well be casual, opportunistic, and irregular, but they can still carry risk for the broader population as much as to the individual. At the same time, male sex work may also be casual, opportunistic and irregular. These sexual transactions may not require a cash exchange, but the sexual servicing may revolve around gifts, employment opportunities, status, and hierarchy. On the other hand it cannot be forgotten that such “invisible” males may also have sexual encounters with other males, based on desire, love, and affection as well.

The FHI/Dowsett study mentioned above talks of “denser networks of MSM”, that usually occur in urban areas where self-identified MSM cluster around specific sites or venues, and are more readily accessible for research, studies, and HIV interventions. This creates a sense of knowledge that can invisibilises other constructs, dynamics and frameworks, and create a perception that this singular intervention “covers it all”. Of course this is not true, and intervention agencies and organisations need to clearly understand that no

one HIV intervention will cover the whole category of male-to-male sexual behaviours. Along with this, there needs to be recognition that geography, time, climate, life stages, migration, the economy, employment, class, age, educational status and so on, all have an impact upon patterns of male-to-male sex, who is involved, when, where, at what time, frequency, partner rates, and actual sexual practice. And along with these variations, are the meanings and significances that individuals place on these acts and behaviours.

14.11 MSM, vulnerability, stigma and social exclusion⁴⁴

While little knowledge appears to exist regarding social exclusion, stigma, discrimination and sexual violence against MSM, particularly feminised MS, experience in the South Asian countries possibly indicate that these could also occur in Afghanistan. Social constructions of masculinity appear to show similarities where the masculine male is seen as hierarchically superior to both women and the feminised male or boy. Sexual violence occurs, so one can fairly make an assumption that gender variance, feminisations and anal penetration are significantly stigmatised, and that perhaps sexual violence against such males also occurs

It needs to be recognised that the male being anally penetrated by another male is often highly stigmatised, both by the penetrator, as well as by general society, and those who are perceived to be recipients of penetration are often treated with contempt and abuse. This occurs because of the perceived feminisation that sexual penetration is believed to produce, along with feminised performance. Such stigmatisation around feminisation produces a range of human rights abuses, blackmail, violence, and male-on-male rape by local men and police.

Not only does poverty, class and education levels stigmatise individuals along with the fact of HIV infection, but also the specific gendered role and identity that some MSM identify with. Thus they are doubly stigmatised because as biological males they are sexually penetrated – and thus not perceived as men. Their feminisation, their crossing of the gender roles and barriers accepted as social norms, reinforces the stigmatisation, leading to exclusion and denial of access to services and to the social compact. This often results in such males who are living with HIV/AIDS to be stigmatised by others who are also living with HIV/AIDS but whose routes of infection are deemed “normal”.

On the other hand, many masculine partners can easily merge into the general normative male society, their sense of masculinity maintained because they are the penetrators, not of other men, but of “not-men”.

In South Asia (and most probably Afghanistan), power inequality dynamics arising from constructions of masculinity, social attitudes towards feminised males and their sexual practices, sexual abuse, assault and rape, stigmatisation and poverty, discrimination and disempowerment, all configure the lives of many feminised and adolescent MSM. As a consequence they play a significant role in the emotional, sexual, physical and economic exploitation of feminised and adolescent males, and give rise to a range of physical, psychological, and emotional problems, which further increase vulnerability and disempowerment. This disempowerment creates significant levels of suicidal impulses and self-damage, an expression of self-hatred and despair. And this of course leads to significant increases to risks of STI/HIV as well as impeding successful implementation of risk reduction strategies.

Many feminised MSM and “beardless youth” not only face possible harassment, sexual violence and rape from law enforcement agents, but also from those whom they have called friends in schools and colleges, from those in positions of trust such as relatives, neighbourhood elders, elder friends, and teachers. Gang rape may not be uncommon. And of course such forced sex is always unsafe and often results in serious physical injury such as a ruptured rectum, internal haemorrhage and so on. Can this also be true in Afghanistan?

One of the central issues that has arisen from NFI research and understanding in South Asia is that often it is effeminacy and not the factual knowledge of male-to-male sexual behaviour that leads to harassment and violence. Thus harassment and sexual violence results from the fact that many such males do not live up to the expected normative standards of masculine behaviour. It is this belief that leads to the notion that those

⁴⁴ See also NFI Briefing Paper No. 7: *Social Justice, human rights and MSM*, available on the NFI website (www.nfi.net)

who are feminised can be exploited and abused and that being feminised somehow weakens the person, a notion often harboured by such males themselves. Can we say that it is different in Afghanistan?

Accepted notions around effeminacy are therefore one of the major factors that lead to disempowerment and opens feminised and/or adolescent MSM to abuse and assault and to a refusal of service provision. The fact that many such males themselves have internalised these notions so strongly, means that specific tools will need to be developed for these males in order to empower them to start valuing their lives and enhancing their self respect so as to reduce their risks for HIV infection.

Little official documentation of abuse of MSM has been undertaken, but more documentation is now occurring, and indicated in the 2003 Human Rights Watch report on HIV/AIDS related abuses in Bangladesh⁴⁵, and the NFI report *Against the Odds*.⁴⁶

14.12 Programming issues

This Desk Review does not discuss programming approaches in terms of providing HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services for MSM to reduce their risks and vulnerability, along with addressing adolescent male sexual exploitation and their social, medical, and psychological needs that this would generate. It is clear that from the evidence identified above there is an urgent need to develop appropriate services and methods of delivery which are readily accessible without hindrance.

However, in order for these to be achieved within a climate of illegality, religious conservatism, stigma and discrimination, a range of issues will need to be addressed, including:

- Addressing legal and social impediments to developing and accessing services
- Capacity building of possible service providers
- Increased knowledge and understanding
- Provision of safe spaces to meet and access services

15. Concluding remarks

Sex between males⁴⁷, whether self-identified in terms of sexual or gender identity or not, appears to occur in all societies, often within frameworks that do not “fit” the heterosexual/homosexual paradigm that is predominant in western cultures and also within much of HIV literature, despite the fact that the term “men who have sex with men” (MSM) was precisely invented to deal with this discrepancy. In reality, to often the acronym MSM is used as a synonym with the terms “homosexual” and/or “gay”, or as a term of identity, which actually invisibilises significant levels of male-to-male sexual behaviours and practices, and where often sexual practice is defined within gender roles and identities. Thus, as an example the penetrating masculine male does not perceive himself as a homosexual, gay or even as a man who has sex with a man, while the penetrated partner may well perceive himself as female, with a feminine identity, and not as a man who has sex with a man. The issues of curiosity, the gendering of age, body pleasure, coercive sex, sexual and political economies, constructions of masculinities along with male hierarchies in all male institutions, are usually ignored as possible drivers for male-to male sex.

Afghanistan is not different in this, and while it appears much more visible, it is clear from what little documentation that exists, that male-to-male behaviours and practices appear to be substantive, with significant degree of sexual exploitation of adolescent males.

⁴⁵ *Ravaging the vulnerable: Abuses against persons at high risk of HIV infection in Bangladesh*, Human Rights Watch website (<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/bangladesh0803/>). Accessed 26/5/2004

⁴⁶ *Against the Odds* – report of the impact of legal, socio-cultural, legislative and socio-economic impediments to effective HIV/AIDS interventions with MSM, 2000, www.nfi.net

⁴⁷ I use the word “male” instead of “men” deliberately because in so many societies much of male-to-male sex is configured within constructs of gender roles and identities, and where the term “man” is framed by constructions of manliness and manhood within a range of socio-cultural ideas and ideologies. Further, I define male-to-male sex as that involving biological males, irrespective of gender identity or performance of either partner(s).

Further, it can be presumed that within these contexts, risks and vulnerabilities to HIV will also be substantive.

Poor data, a lack of appropriate research, significant levels of discrimination, stigma and denial, along with human rights abuse and legal impediments, not only generate difficulties in reaching males who have sex with males in all their complexity and diversity, but also remain as barriers in developing sustainable and effective HIV prevention work.

Naz Foundation International has identified a number of impediments to effective HIV prevention programmes that reach males who have sex with males including:

- Criminalisation, human rights abuse, social exclusion, stigma, and discrimination.
- Denial that sexual behaviours between males – including male-to-male sex work – exist (for a range of cultural, political, social, and religious reasons).
- Where at times male-to-male sex is accepted, the extent of such practices may be denied.⁴⁸
- A lack of good knowledge and information (poor sociological/anthropological research, lack of epidemiological and behavioural data, a-prior assumptions, homophobia/gender-phobia).
- A lack of understanding of the complexity and diversity of male-to-male sexual behaviours, practices and identities.
- Invisibility of much of male-to-male sex.
- Cultural values of religious values, shame, dishonour, socially compulsory marriage, and masculinity.
- The unwillingness of government, donor and non-government organisations to recognise the issues and support appropriate studies.
- Inappropriate language and terminologies and constructions of sexualities and identities used in public discourses.
- Concepts of gender that invisibilise gender variance and male-to-male sex.

All this, and more, leads to a lack of effective and appropriate prevention programmes addressing male-to-male sexual behaviours and vulnerability and risk to HIV infection and transmission, and while currently, the data seems to indicate that Afghanistan is a low prevalence country as defined by UNAIDS, all the factors exist that may change this to a country with localised concentrated epidemics.

At the same time, with the significant levels of male sexual exploitation that appears to exist in country that is confounded by continuing civil conflict and violence and the fear of a resurgent Taliban, processes, both legal and social, to address become difficult to implement and carry through.

While it is clear is that the needs of males who have sex with males have historically been greatly neglected in many parts of Asia until recently where there has been a greater recognition of the “need to develop an enhanced response” to these needs, particularly after the publication of the Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia’s report *Redefining AIDS in Asia*.

However, the response could be very patchy and ad-hoc, without a clear strategic vision, locally, nationally or regionally, to underpin any increase in efforts. At the same time they also reflect, as yet, limited responses to the complex dynamics of male-to-male sex, often perceiving the MSM as a “target group”. This usually means that the most visible population of MSM, such as *bacha bazi*, or perhaps (some) feminised male commercial sex workers who are more visible because of dress and performance. But that also means that many other frameworks of male-to-male sex still need to be addressed.

This is, of course, a rapid desk review with a very limited body of knowledge, and by its very nature, will not be a comprehensive review, nor does it claim to be. Hopefully a broad overview emerges that highlights the complexity, gender diversity, and range of male-to-male sex.

Along with this, a number of issues of concern have been made that address concerns around a lack of knowledge and understanding, strategies for appropriate interventions, lack of skills, and appropriate policies.

⁴⁸ In a HIV intervention project in India conducted by an MSM CBO the government refused to accept the number of contacts being made by the project as “not realistic”. Report to NFI from one of its partner projects, 2002.

Clearly there is a lack of knowledge and data on male-to-male sex, its diversity and complexity, and the range of socio-cultural contexts in which this behaviour takes place. What the review further identifies is that conceptual frameworks to understand male-to-male sex, risky sexual practices, along with HIV and AIDS risk need to themselves be reviewed and challenged, and that the category MSM, or even *bacha bazi*, does not fully capture this diversity and complexity, while carrying a risk of generating a limited and narrow response to the urgent concerns that unprotected anal sex between males (what about unprotected anal sex between males and females?) in terms of HIV epidemics in Afghanistan.

While these studies and documents reviewed in this report may be indicative and suggestive, that is all they are, and cannot be used to clearly articulate programmatic interventions that will “solve the problem of at-risk males who have sex with males” for the countries’ National AIDS Programmes.

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