

IDS Sexuality and Development Programme



Sexuality and the Economy in China

About the IDS Sexuality and Development Programme

The IDS Sexuality and Development Programme aims to achieve significant reductions in human rights violations, poverty and marginalisation through more effective development policy and practice that responds to the needs of people marginalised because of their sexuality. We undertake and support research and communications aimed at rethinking the relationship between sexuality, rights and development by building stronger links between people in different contexts working to realise their sexual rights. Working closely with established networks and movements around the world, our participatory approaches to protecting and respecting rights are based upon strategies drawn from local communities that are most affected.

To learn more about our work see: www.ids.ac.uk/idsresearch/sexuality and subscribe to receive our regular blog posts at www.participationpower.wordpress.com.

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1 Introduction: Changing relationships between sex and money

A few years ago a Chinese friend asked me ‘why do British people get married?’ Unable to come up with a clear answer, I asked in turn ‘why do Chinese people get married?’ She thought for a short moment before replying with a laugh ‘to get housing!’ Indeed, until a few years ago, urban Chinese residents working in the formal sector would be allocated housing by their employers at no cost, or else heavily subsidised. However, that housing was often a dormitory bed until marriage made one eligible for a flat of some kind, and many work units only allocated housing to male employees on the assumption that women would access housing through their husbands. I know one gay man who paid a divorced woman to marry him. After they registered the marriage, they had no further contact, but he was able to take the certificate to his employer and get his flat. And I know an unmarried woman academic who due to her academic prowess and international reputation was eventually allocated a flat, however it was the smallest one-room studio apartment available. She still bemoans why she didn’t organise a fake marriage to some gay man and get the two bedroom option that was due to her. And a woman still living with her abusive husband, who took part in the workshop this article describes, told me numbly of how he had said to her he would never have married her if she had not had a flat to her name.

Now with economic reform in China, and a more marketised economy, employers far more rarely provide housing for employees regardless of their marital status. But marriage and other kinds of relationship formations and expressions of sexuality still impact on access to resources. And economic status impacts on access to sex and partners as well as possibilities for sexual expression. These interconnections are demonstrated by a number of studies on sexuality in China, most explicitly addressed in regard to sex work (Pan 2005; Zheng 2009) but also in a number of other areas. For example, Liu describes how women working in sales in Nanjing have to tread a fine line in order to successfully get and keep their jobs, presenting themselves as attractive according to conventional gender stereotypes, but not too loose or available; ‘pretty but not sexy’ (Liu 2008:88). And Suda identifies economic independence as crucial to enabling lesbian women to continue with their lesbian identities and relationships after their late twenties, when social and economic pressures to marry intensify (Suda 2010).

Heteronormative economic structures (that is, economic structures that reflect and perpetuate a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation) can exclude people who do not fit with sexuality and gender norms – such as people who don’t marry into housing, or women who are too ugly or too sexy to work in sales, or low income lesbians. Exchanges in the informal economy depend on relationships of trust – and people with non-conforming sexualities or known to be HIV positive may not be trusted by the wider community. They may instead have to rely on each other, forming economic subcultures in survivalist mode. People who manage to fit norms may be included but on adverse terms – such as the woman who marries a man with housing, but is kept aware of her dependent status, and does not dare to divorce him if the relationship turns sour because she does not have anywhere else to live. And others might gain from the sexuality-economy interplay even by breaking the rules, such as those sex workers who control their own income and make a good living.

National and international development policies and practices contribute to the creation of these heteronormative economic structures, by assuming that marriage is the norm, that heterosexual families should be the basic unit for poverty reduction strategies, that economic development is a priority over sexual rights and that sexuality only needs to be addressed in relation to health or violence (Bedford 2008; Jolly 2010, a, b).

Can we imagine instead development which allows for the diverse realities of people's sexual lives, creates virtuous synergies between economic and sexual justice, and increases possibilities for happiness, wellbeing and pleasure in relationships and in life, in coordination with efforts to tackle poverty? In order to do so we need to better understand the links between sexuality and the economy.

2 The ‘Sexuality and the Economy’ workshop

This was the goal of a participatory workshop on ‘Sexuality and Economy’ run by Pink Space NGO Beijing and the Institute of Development Studies Sexuality and Development Programme, held in BeiDaiHe, on 9-10 July 2010, and co-facilitated by myself and Xiaopei He of Pink Space. Twenty people came together from the groups with whom Pink Space has been working over the past two years – women living with HIV/AIDS, female and male sex workers, lesbian and bisexual women, transgender people, gay men, and women married to gay men. The latter had married their husbands without knowing they were gay, sometimes because the man deliberately set out to deceive them in order to hide his sexual orientation to shield himself from homophobia, sometimes because he himself had not realised/developed the extent of his attraction to men at the beginning of the marriage. These groups, all facing marginalisation in relation to their gender and sexuality, have been involved in ongoing exchanges facilitated by Pink Space to build mutual understanding and solidarity between them, to document and share an understanding of sexual realities in China, and build capacity for advocacy and policy influence.

I was nervous that a workshop exploring people’s own experiences of sexual relationships and economic status – often two of the most sensitive issues – would be difficult to facilitate, even though the participants had already taken part in a series of exchanges and built up a level of mutual trust with each other. I was also unsure how grassroots activists would analyse sexuality-economy intersections, when many of my academic colleagues seem to find it challenging to grasp that the two are interconnected. I need not have worried. Sex and money are both very concrete and the workshop participants had plenty to say about the trade-offs and trade-ons between the two. And most participants were relaxed and eager to share details of their economic and sexual lives. As facilitators we were careful to structure the workshop to ensure that no one felt pressured to share what they did not want to, so the few more reticent participants shared in pairs or smaller groups, or talked in more general terms rather than describing their personal trajectories. In this paper I summarise key issues that emerged based on my notes and on audio recordings of the workshop.

2.1 Is sex or money more important?

The question was raised as to whether sex or money was more important. Initially the general consensus was that money is more important. The following assertions were made: you only want sex if your stomach is full; you can’t get an erection if you are starving; you can’t always get more money, but you can always masturbate; you can live without sex but not without money. It was also stated that in the countryside people want family, and to carry on the family line, and this is more important than sex or money. However, longer term economic considerations are still a factor, as you need to have children to look after you when you are old. But as the discussion went on, people began to nuance their view that money was more important.

The point was made that people make material sacrifices for sex and relationships. Some male migrant workers with minimal earnings still buy sex. One woman said she’d left her gay husband to pursue fulfilment of her sexual and romantic desires, although this meant giving up air conditioning, a fridge, and other material goods he provided. And some people do put their physical security at risk in order to pursue their desires – such as people who had affairs when non-marital sex could be severely penalised during the Cultural Revolution.

2.2 It depends how much money you have...

The general conclusion was that money is likely to be more important than sex for people at starvation level. Once essential needs are met, then more sexual fulfilment might make you happier than more money. After that point, money may bring you more status, while what sex brings you is more 'internal'.

One of the sex worker participants said she had been born poor, and her whole life she had been working hard to get richer, and now to provide for her daughter and mother. For her sex was about getting money, and her priorities were clear. But this is partly because she's never been that interested in sex, with the exception of with her first client. He was the only person with whom she'd ever had an orgasm, and she had fallen in love with him, but he was already married so their relationship could only go so far. Even now she is married, sex is not important, and she's more excited about the trust and cuddles she shares with her husband, although she doesn't let him know the reality of her indifference to their sexual interactions for fear of hurting his pride. And he does provide for her materially, contributing a larger share of the household income, and she's now less materialistic and more content with her lot.

2.3 And how much sex...

'I've always had money but not sex. Most of my life I've been repressed', explained one participant, a doctor who attributed her earning power to being 'capable'. Frustrated desires for sex and love were a big factor in her life. She cares a great deal about sex precisely because she has not found much satisfaction. Many men pursued her during her twenties, but due to fear of pregnancy and social approbation, she controlled herself and abstained from penetrative sex until her desires overcame her and she ended up having intercourse with one of the men. She did get pregnant and had to marry him, even though she had already realised he was not her dream match. They soon started to sleep in separate beds. She then discovered she was HIV positive, and he became even less supportive, so she divorced him. After her diagnosis she met some men on the internet and had sex with them, but only to build her self confidence and reassure herself that she was still attractive. It was not what she wanted. Not sure what she wants, and not finding it easy to meet partners she likes and who will accept her HIV status, she now lives without sex, with the exception of visits to a beauty parlour where the beautician 'gives a present' to her favoured clients of a vibrator massage and orgasm. (This revelation generated great interest as no other participants had ever heard of such a service from beauticians.)

2.4 And how old you are...

The other conclusion was that it depends on individual inclination to sex, romance, and money, which is hugely affected by age. The group subscribed to the stereotype that young people are more romantic, and more likely to prioritise love and desire over material considerations. The older generation are concerned about their children 'making a good match' in material and class terms. Some rural couples elope if their parents refuse to sanction their relationships, and parents sometimes still succeed in breaking them up and imposing marriage with someone they consider a better option.

One woman married to a gay man for twenty years said they rarely had sex, and that every time she woke up at night in bed and looked at him he had his face turned away from her. Now in her fifties and divorced, she is looking for a new man online and through other channels, but finds that men her

age are pragmatic. 'Romance is for youth', she says. Men her age or older won't marry a woman with an unmarried son because they fear having to pay the bride price for his marriage. They won't marry someone in bad health. Older men are, she continued, looking for 'money, a flower vase [an ornamental good looking wife] or a maid. Mostly they want money'.

One young lesbian explained she wanted economic stability before she established a relationship, in part to avoid dependence on her partner. A bisexual woman now in her forties contrasted this desire with her own trajectory. As she gets older, she has more money but less lust, more opportunities for sex but less desire to act upon them. In her own life, she finds no linear relationship between sex and money, and that the relative importance of each to her personally fluctuates.

2.5 Is love material?

A migrant man, married to a rural woman back home, and now living with his city boyfriend (who was also at the workshop), declared that 'love is not the issue, most people don't think about that'. We asked participants to draw a picture to illustrate the trajectories of their economic, sexual and love lives. He drew a picture of a large tree, with himself holding hands with his wife and child sheltering under the tree on the one side, and another picture of himself holding hands with his boyfriend under the other side. All the people depicted were smiling. He explained to me that the tree symbolised economic support and security provided by his economically secure boyfriend to himself and his wife and child, and that since this relationship had started things had been good. However, he declined to share his story with the larger group, possibly for fear the wives of gay men would challenge his version of events.

The sex worker activist and trainer immediately subsumed love under money. 'I can pretend to love you to get your money'. She described how masseurs may not see themselves as sex workers, instead they just say that they date the men they massage – often meeting outside work premises for meals out, shopping and sex. The women are more interested in training on how to make money than on condom use. Her top tip was not to invest in a long term relationship imagining at some point that he will get serious or marry you and share his income with you. Instead at an early stage, get a friend to phone when you are with your date pretending to be a relative from home saying that a family member is gravely ill and may die if an expensive operation is not carried out. You then burst into tears and explain the situation to your boyfriend. How much money he gives you is not the key issue, but if he is sincere and gives you what he can, then he's a keeper.

I asked her why you want him to be sincere if you are blatantly deceiving him. She said it's more complex than that. You are investing time and energy in the relationship, and need to know what the returns will be in both material and emotional terms. And he on some level also knows that this is an exchange. Somewhat contradictorily, as emotions often are, she also said that feelings can be genuine on the part of both parties, and that knowing someone cares enough to provide are part of what stimulates those feelings.

A gay man told of a conversation with a heterosexual married friend, who told how every night of his life, his wife brought him a cup of tea. For him, this symbolised the depth of their life-long love and commitment. The quiet sweet feelings evoked would never be enjoyed by his gay friend who changed relationships every few years, he declared. The gay man explained to us that his friend was wrong on two counts, first he mistook a sexist division of household labour for love. Secondly, he failed to

appreciate the joys of loving more than one person. Nevertheless, his friend's feelings about tea and love did again suggest interconnections between the material and the emotional.

2.6 HIV, marriage and migration

'If a woman is found to be HIV positive, will her husband leave her?' a participant asked the two activists from HIV positive women's groups; one rural, one urban. 'Not if she got it through selling blood' replied the rural woman, 'and anyway, no one else will marry him if his ex-wife is infected, and couples are economically dependent on each other, so it's hard to divorce.' 'In the city they might get divorced, especially if they are young' replied the urban woman.

The rural woman told of how her mum died when she was ten so she had to drop out of school to look after her little sister. Later, she and a man seven years older than her fell in love with each other. Due to the age difference her family did not agree to the relationship, so they never formalised the marriage, and although de facto married for many years, still don't have a marriage certificate. Her husband's family was poor and he had several brothers who he had to support in finding brides (paying bride price). She started to sell blood and at one point 90 per cent of the family income came from her selling blood. She explained that it is often the case that women sell blood as men need to stay strong to support the family [even though she was generating most of the family income herself] and also men are more likely to migrate to cities to find work while women stay behind to look after the family. Her explanations of gendered patterns of blood selling are reiterated in a recent study of gender and HIV/AIDS in China (Bu and Liu 2010).

2.7 Sexual rights organisations taking on economic issues

After a series of fairly open participatory games and discussions revolving around participants' own experiences and analyses, we invited people to form clusters based on their areas of activism to analyse their own organisations' approaches to economy-sexuality intersections. Participants settled into four groups: the women married to gay men, and a gay man; the sex worker activist, the migrant man (who had also sold sex), and a lesbian working on sex worker education; the lesbians, bisexual women, and a trans man; and the two HIV positive women activists. They were asked to consider who they include and exclude in their organisations, either intentionally or unintentionally, along lines of economic status and sexual identity, and if and how they address economic issues.

We set this topic because sexual rights movements, like any other movement, can reflect the economic and other inequalities of the society in which they function. For example, gay men in China and elsewhere often have more resources than lesbians, both because men in general have more status and resources than do women, because HIV funding targets 'Men who have Sex with Men', so 'Lesbian and Gay' movements are often in practice dominated by gay men. And elite or middle class more educated people may dominate in any organisation which has not explicitly considered issues of economic justice. Previously a group of women married to gay men had sought to exclude the less educated women who they labelled 'low quality' and difficult to work with.

The women married to gay men reported back from their discussion that economic dependence on husbands and difficulties divorcing in material terms are a big issue for them. However, they have not yet formally established an organisation, so have done little work on this, other than occasional informal

advice on economic and legal issues for women considering divorce. To date they have focussed efforts on outreach and running a hotline. A new priority will be to communicate with young gay men and their parents to discourage them from marrying by sharing tales of suffering wives.

The two women living with HIV reported that sometimes middle class people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) can be more isolated. The psychological burden is less in poorer rural areas where a high proportion of villagers got HIV through selling blood (a finding borne out by Bu and Liu 2010). However, income generation is still a need for poorer PLHA, but they have not successfully managed to organise any initiatives due to lack of market knowledge. They now have funding from the Chinese government's Centre for Disease Control and the Gates Foundation, so they may be able to develop work in this area.

The sex worker group's presentation focussed on one initiative, a small NGO run by four former sex workers, all of whom had worked in brothels, not the street, so were not among the poorest themselves. They educate both street and brothel sex workers, and massage parlour workers, mainly through individual conversations in their spare moments while waiting for clients. Money skills was a big part of the information they shared – how to set up a bank account, how to get your boyfriend to provide some material goods in your name, how to invest well and not just give your earnings to your brother to look after. They also provide health education and support. Their work is constrained in scope due to limited funding, and limited capacity to write funding proposals.

The lesbian, bisexual and transgender group focussed on the 'lala salon', a thriving discussion/social group that meets every Saturday afternoon in Beijing, and has done so for several years, usually drawing over 50 lala (lesbian women), as well as bisexual women, gay-friendly women, transgender people, and queer men, who spend the afternoon at the salon and then go on to dinner. This is one of the most regular and ongoing lesbian events in China, and serves as a key site for mutual support, to build community, find partners, share information and have fun. In a climate where homosexuality is legal, but still politically and socially sensitive, and on some levels censored in mainstream media, such get-togethers are vital to many people's emotional lives.

The people who come are mostly middle class. This is because there is a charge of about 20 Yuan (£2) for participation, and it is held in a commercial venue where buying a drink at least now and then is expected. The lead organiser pointed out that the salon is economically self-sustaining, and that only with core funding and dependence, probably from an international donor, could the events be made more accessible to lower income participants.

However, economic issues are a subject of discussion at the salon, and an area needing action. Women are already economically disadvantaged compared to men, and lala in particular, especially young lala, often face discrimination due to their sexual identity or non-conforming gender expression. Some participants have suggested setting up lala businesses, and finding ways to tackle homophobia among employers.

3 Conclusion: What does this mean for development?

Questioning priorities: Development policies and programming currently focus more on poverty reduction and economic growth than on sexuality. But as even this short workshop demonstrates, this does not necessarily match with the priorities of the people such policies are supposed to benefit. For many people in many situations, including at fairly low income levels, following their desires around sex, relationships and gender expression are just as important as raising their material standards of living. If development is serious about improving wellbeing, the importance of sexuality must be taken into account.

Recognising the connections between sexuality and the economy: The workshop also yielded a host of insights on how deeply connected sex, love and economy are. Participants affirmed through their experiences and analyses that the economy is heteronormative. People with non-conforming sexual or relationships formations or gender identities can face discrimination in the formal and informal sector which can affect their access to housing and income.

Poverty reduction initiatives targeting people with stigmatised sexualities: Much of the existing activism related to sexuality in China and elsewhere in the global South is already supporting their members in dealing with economic challenges. For example sex workers' trainings on money skills, and PLHA trying to organise income generation activities. Such initiatives demonstrate a need for poverty reduction efforts to address the needs of people with stigmatised sexualities, including targeting specific initiatives to these groups.

Challenging economic structures: While income generation and money skills are vital, they will not change the prejudices of employers, customers and lenders, nor heteronormative economic policies. Thus struggles for sexual justice and rights more broadly must continue, and link with struggles for economic justice. Sexual rights activists need to be supported with capacity building in economic literacy and participatory budgeting skills. Economic policies and budgets need to be analysed to make visible the underlying assumptions about relationships and family forms, to establish if and how they are excluding certain groups or reinforcing unequal and oppressive relationships. Development policies and practices must also undergo such an examination if they are to avoid intensifying the marginalisation of already marginalised groups.

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Can we imagine a vision of development which allows for the diverse realities of people's sexual lives, creates virtuous synergies between economic and sexual justice, and increases possibilities for happiness, wellbeing and pleasure in relationships and in life, in coordination with efforts to tackle poverty? In order to do so we need to better understand the links between sexuality and the economy.

This publication examines the changing relationships between sex and money in contemporary China. Factors such as marriage or other forms of sexual expression still impact upon access to resources, whilst financial and economic status impacts dramatically upon access to sex and partners, as well as opportunities for pleasure and sexual expression. Unspoken assumptions in current national and international development policies and practices contribute to the creation of heteronormative economic structures that exclude people who do not fit within narrow sexuality and gender norms.

The author focuses upon the findings arising from a participatory workshop 'Sexuality and Economy' that took place with a number of individuals marginalised as a result of their sexual identity. The workshop was run by Pink Space NGO Beijing and the Institute of Development Studies Sexuality and Development Programme in July 2010. The discussion revealed that whilst development policies and programmes focus on poverty reduction and economic growth, many people on low incomes still believe that exploring their desires around sex, relationships and gender expression are just as important as raising their material standards of living. In parallel, much more work is needed to ensure that poverty alleviation initiatives address the needs of people with stigmatised sexualities.