



## Pornography, Pleasure, Gender and Sex Education in Bangladesh

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# Introduction: The changing economic and sexual landscape of Dhaka

Over the past two decades, Dhaka city has changed from a small city to a large urbanised space. It is one of the fastest growing megacities, with 14 million residents, and it is predicted that it will become the ninth largest city in the world by 2015 due to continued migration and urbanisation (Rashid 2009). Over those same two decades, Bangladesh's culture of silence around sexuality has been disturbed with the emergence of HIV/AIDS as a global pandemic from the 1990s. Fears of 'deviant' sexual practices shifted the parameters of public discourse on sexuality. At the same time, from posters of local films displaying women and men in revealing clothing on city walls, to the latest films on television and the advent of digital technology making the internet and local and foreign pornography DVDs and CDs widely accessible, popular culture is saturated with images of sexuality. While sex and sexuality is everywhere in Bangladesh, for the most part these discussions have been ignored within academic, public health and policy arenas, and public discussions of sex and sexuality have been mainly relegated to men having sex with men and within a biomedical discourse.

The migration of men and women from rural areas into Dhaka temporarily or for longer periods is changing the sexual landscape of the city. The global market economy has led to widening employment, and education opportunities and hopes for a better life have attracted people in large numbers. The result of this mass migration is increased population density, a growing informal economy and market sector and the rapid growth of urban slum and squatter settlements (Rashid 2009; Islam *et al.* 2006). It is estimated that 300,000 to 400,000 new migrants, move into the city annually (World Bank 2006). Many of the migrants, both male and female, come to the city and find work in the informal sector. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2006) found that half the migrant workforce is employed in household and unorganised labour, while about 800,000 work in the textile industry. Despite this, unemployment remains high at 23 per cent and poor men and women live in poor and low-income neighbourhoods and in slum settlements on the periphery of the city. For males, there are opportunities to work as construction workers, truck drivers, rickshaw pullers, or in factories. Others involve themselves in petty trading and some work as domestic staff, as drivers and household cooks. In the informal sector they work as hawkers, peddlers, in small shops and stalls and as roadside vendors and in rickshaw transport (Cervero 2000), with rickshaw drivers in the city numbering as many as 400,000.<sup>1</sup>

Most women are employed in the garment factories – almost 70 per cent of workers in the ready-made garment manufacturing sector are female. The majority of the rest work as domestic help and some are involved in the sex industry. All of this creates more social interaction with the opposite sex, and women and men both experience greater mobility and anonymity in the city, resulting in different opportunities and impacting on their gender relationships, social and sexual behaviour and lifestyles. In the cities, young women often live in groups in rented private accommodation in low-income settlements/slums, and in some cases in relatively better conditions in hostels run by the state or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This is the first time in the history of the country that young, single women from the villages have been allowed to live on their own in the cities, unsupervised by male family members (PILER and SAAPE 2009).

Increased urbanisation, anonymity and access to urban lifestyles have been associated with larger political, economic and social transformations. Within this context, a mobile and migrant workforce is dramatically experiencing and changing the social dynamics of Dhaka city life. Yet there is very little written on emerging sexualities in this new landscape.

This publication explores the findings of qualitative research undertaken over a period of three months by the Centre of Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS<sup>2</sup> at two major bus terminals in the city. This research reveals a parallel world existing in most of the backstreets of Dhaka city, in major transportation hubs and industrialised spaces, where there is an influx of cheap pornographic materials, both local and foreign, X-rated films and a burgeoning sex industry, which means that sex workers are easily accessible.

Discussions with male respondents at these sites found that local ideas on sex and sexuality are gradually being transformed because now 'sex' is directly transported into people's homes, via electronic media (films, advertisements) and the internet, which are widely accessible to all. Interviews suggested that pornographic movies and materials are one of the main sources of information on sexuality for poor men living in urban Dhaka city and that a burgeoning sex industry and an influx of pornography facilitate a certain notion of masculinity with implications for gender norms, sexual relationships and sexual health.

This publication highlights how these emerging geographic spaces in the city, with their readily available pornography and sex workers, serve as alternative sites of communication, knowledge and information on sex. They contribute to forming the world view, sexual attitudes and identities of the men we interviewed, who are mainly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

# Methodology

Qualitative research was conducted in the two major commercial bus sites of Dhaka city, Sayedabad and Gabtoli, from October 2009 to January 2010. These two sites were selected because they are well known and served as the two main entrance and exit points for many travellers coming to Dhaka city and going to other inter-district bus stops. We interviewed 32 men aged between 21 and 45, of whom 18 were married and 14 unmarried. Respondents included workers employed at the bus stations, cleaners, labourers, sweepers, petty businessmen (selling newspapers, or small goods on the sidewalks) and low-income migrants who used the stations as a transport hub to commute to work from their rural residences. One participant was a young student. All interviews were conducted in and around the bus terminals. We talked with each individual informally and generally before we broached the more sensitive topics; overall, most of the men were open and frank about their feelings and experiences. In some circumstances we conducted follow-up interviews with respondents who worked in a fixed site so we could locate them, but otherwise we conducted one-time interviews, taking two hours or more.

Informal discussions, observations and interviews with key informants – bus conductors, street vendors, businessmen running residential hotels, managers of cinema halls and shopkeepers – were also conducted. All the interviews were carried out by two male interviewers. Bus terminals are busy sites for migrant workers and a mobile labour force, many of whom are either waiting for the next bus, waiting in between jobs or selling a product, for example as a street hawker or shopkeeper. It was easy to find men to speak to, but it took some time to get them to speak about their own personal experiences, particularly about sexual anxieties. Men were chosen randomly; anyone was interviewed who was willing to speak to the interviewers for any length of time. Individual males were further selected from some of the informal group discussions for further in-depth interviews.

It is important to note that the study focused specifically on reproductive and sexual health concerns and factors, such as pornography, the local media, shops and health providers, which influenced men's understandings about their health and themselves. While this brought forth valuable insights from the men, it did not attempt to uncover the many other forms of masculinities which exist, or the prevalence of fluid behaviours and attitudes. We also did not focus on discussions of pleasure but specifically on sexual concerns and anxieties as expressed by the men in the interviews. It is critically important not to generalise these findings nor essentialise all men into one category as described in this publication. Despite these limitations, the study is built on the pioneering surveys of 693 at one site (in 2007), and subsequently of 311 married men at three sites in Bangladesh (in 2010), which found a high degree of self-reported psychosocial sexual health concerns, with enormous social, psychological and economic costs. Therefore, this publication highlights the importance of paying attention to the social and cultural dimensions of sexual health that impact on men's understandings of self, identity and behaviour, with implications on risky behaviour.

# Findings

## **Pornography is widely available**

Many of the men interviewed were poor, living in urban slum settlements, often sharing crowded spaces in makeshift shacks, sleeping on the floor with four to six other men or with family members. Slums lack clean water, sometimes lack access to electricity, and populations living there remain socially excluded.

Nevertheless, even in slum settlements, most poor people have access to mobile phones, which are cheap, and many households have television sets. Internet access is available to a lower-income but educated group, but remains beyond the reach of the poorest. Some of the poor men interviewed either rented DVD players or televisions, or watched in groups at the home of a friend who had a television. Others went to cinemas, which were easily accessible. Access to digital technology introduces images of sexual behaviour into the lives of men and women who have never travelled outside the country, but who are now made aware of the different patterns of behaviour in different countries, revealing new lifestyles and ways of thinking about gender relations, sexuality and sexual behaviour. With the arrival of new and cheap digital technologies and the presence of poster advertisements in the streets, cinema halls and the print media, both foreign and domestic pornography seems to have become a central fixture in the everyday lives of urban males living in the city. 'Footpath' pornography (Srivastava 2010) in the form of magazines, CDs and local and foreign 'blue' films is a profitable business in these transportation nodes and an extremely popular and easy source of adult male entertainment. Here I am borrowing Srivastava's term 'footpath pornography' derived from his research in Delhi because there, as in Dhaka, pornography is available everywhere in the form of magazines, CDs, local and foreign 'blue' films.

## **'Choti' magazines**

Some of the local pornography, referred to as *choti* magazines, with nude pictures, are sold by street hawkers, or on the footpaths hidden from view under other magazines and newspapers. According to the vendors, the local pornography magazines and films are much more popular than foreign films and are in demand. These publications are sold illegally and are full of explicit content to attract the readers. Most of the stories are focused on sex and the female body. Prices vary and depend on the bargaining power of the hawker and the customer. As one bus station vendor explained, three types of magazines are available – some contain pictures of Bangladeshi girls, some of Indian girls and others have English girls, posing nude. Another shop vendor, Rahman, said that he had a profit of around Taka 500<sup>3</sup> every day. He said,

*A man comes and gives me a bunch of these to sell and I keep them in my shop because they have a demand, they sell well and also give a good profit. But people usually come to buy them at night. If they like, they buy them... Don't you understand people live here without their wives, they enjoy watching the pictures and reading the contents. Many of them meet their sexual needs [referring to masturbation] after reading these magazines.*

Rahman claimed to have many *choti* books (adult story books with graphic illustrations of nude men and women) but he didn't display them openly until people asked for them. Sometimes he began shouting out to passersby, 'Buy one and another is free. Limited stock!'

## **Blue films**

For the average male waiting at terminals, a bewildering array of films are available, from local to international, with titles such as 'Night Queen', 'Red Rose', *Garam Masalla* ('Hot Spices'), *Indian Garam Masalla* ('Indian Hot Spices'), 'Private and for Adult', 'Teenage Girls', *London-er-Kanya* ('Girl of London'), 'Love Game', 'Best of Arabian' and so on, with pictures of nude men and women on the cover. These are sold for 50–100 Taka, depending on the quality and 'X-rated-ness' of the film. Hindi and local films are also very popular.<sup>4</sup>



Men wander in and out of the shops and many stand nearby browsing through some of the magazines on display. Men regularly accessed these films and rented video recorders to watch them in groups. Others borrowed CDs and watched with their wives. For many of them, watching pornography is partly about entertainment and partly an opportunity for learning about sex. They learn of 'good and bad sex', sexual positions, techniques and ideas about pleasure and desire. Some men spoke of purchasing 'blue' films to arouse their partner: 'I need to do lots of things to make her sexually aroused. She becomes aroused if she sees blue [pornographic] films. She wants to have sex several times. That night we had sex three times'.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to surmise whether men exaggerate their sexual experiences in the interviews. A male construction worker who was having an affair with his neighbour's wife claimed, 'She asked me to have sex in different positions... she has learned all these from the pornographic movie which her husband has shown her'.

### **Pornography is a key source of information on sex**

This culture of 'footpath' pornography sold in the transportation hubs of Dhaka city is a parallel world to mainstream society, but offers a counter discourse and 'window to the world of contemporary sexual culture' (Srivastava 2004: 190–1), forming people's ideas of who they are, whether they are men or not, and what they can expect from female partners.

Access to television, the internet and CDs, DVDs and cinemas encourages the free flow of information and misinformation regarding sexual relationships, sexual performance, intimacy, and exchanges on sexual knowledge. Information on sex is obtained mainly from these unofficial networks of peers, speaking to informal health providers and watching X-rated films, which have become an important source of ideas regarding male and female bodies, behaviour and sexuality (see Srivastava 2004: 76, for similar findings). In a separate survey conducted by the Centre of Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS on the sexuality of 103 poor men and 106 poor women living in urban slums in Chittagong, Bangladesh,<sup>6</sup> it was found that the top three sources of information on sexuality mentioned by women were pornography, friends and mobile phones (where sometimes explicit pictures and information can be downloaded); men reported the media (television, radio, newspaper, cinema), pornography and mobile phones. The other important sources mentioned were relatives and informal providers of health services.

Many of the local pornographic magazines and booklets that offer information on sex are viewed as useful information on female and male anatomies and so on. As one young man responded,

*When I was in class nine there was a shop at the end of our area which was run by an old man. I used to withdraw several sexual books from that shop by depositing 100 Taka. If I wanted to take that book at home I had to give five Taka. After I finished reading that I used to return it and take another one for five Taka. There was everything in these books such as the names of the different parts of a female body, by touching [those areas] where a woman gets excited and when a woman remains angry. All these things I have learnt from those choti books.*

While *choti* books are erotic, pornographic materials, it is not clear whether this respondent is referring to sexually explicit materials and illustrations found in these books or general local sex guidebooks.

In some of the in-depth interviews as well as during one informal discussion, men mentioned how sex had changed from the 'traditional Bangladeshi sex position of a man lying on top of a woman' to more 'foreign styles of sex' which allowed for 'sex on chairs, standing up and from the back', which they viewed as 'modern', 'more pleasurable and enjoyable'. These sexual images are being forever portrayed, displayed, distributed, circulated and sold, and reproduce certain roles and expectations from both men and women.

## **Pornography is a key source of misinformation on sex, sexuality and gender**

### ***Pornography shows what 'real men' are***

Men are both impressed and intimidated by the sexually powerful, healthy and fit men and sexually insatiable women portrayed in pornographic films and the media. Ideas of masculinity and what is a 'real man' are influenced by these sources. When asked what ideal male traits are, one young transport worker emphasised sexual attributes:

*A real male is a man who has a large size penis and females are scared of and impressed by him and he can have sex with any woman... I have read this in several choti books. They are not expensive. It only costs 20–25 Taka each. But there are some with the pictures and those are a bit more expensive, 30–40 Taka. I have also seen it in the blue films.<sup>7</sup>*

### **Size**

Some men also spoke of financial responsibility to the family as an important attribute of a 'real man' and as a positive aspect of masculinity, but for most the physical and social attributes of a 'real man' were primarily about sexual capabilities. To achieve these, one needed to have the 'right' physical anatomy and prolonged sexual intercourse was important. To satisfy a woman, it was commonly perceived that a man should ideally have a large, long or thick penis, with preference given to 'eight to ten inches'. One respondent stated,

*Of course penis size matters a lot for a real man. You can't draw water with an eight foot long rope from a well with depth of ten feet. So it needs to be of appropriate size, at least six to eight inches... What is the point if a woman doesn't feel what is going in and out of her vagina!*

A few men disagreed and believed that it was more the 'technique' rather than the size that affected sexual performance.

### **Duration**

Most of the men shared concerns about performance and mentioned that a sexual partner could not be satisfied unless they prolonged the sexual act for a maximum period of time, with most specifying 30 minutes as the ideal time. As one older male explained, 'how degrading it would be if I cannot continue having sex for more than five minutes'. Another young male respondent shared,

*I think I am not a real male because I cannot continue having sex for more than two–three minutes. I have taken many pills/tablets etc. but nothing works. When selling the medicine they say it would help to continue having sex for longer period but actually it does not work for more than ten minutes. Most of the men of this area are sexually dissatisfied including all my friends. Sometimes I think, what is the point of living if I cannot provide sexual satisfaction?*

Pornographic materials, and counsel and treatment messages from informal providers, were the reference points for the 'ideal time' for sexual intercourse. Many of the men were impressed by the stamina of pornography actors and the length of time they managed to last during sexual intercourse.

### **Anxieties around sexual performance**

Many of the men mentioned their fantasy of an 'ideal male', and remain anxious about their lack of adequate sexual skills. A number of typical comments are shared below:

*I am not married but still from my friends and by reading those choti books I have learnt that if you don't arouse a woman before having sex you cannot satisfy her. I have read in the choti books that you have to excite the women, whether wife or other women, for 10–15 minutes earlier than having sex.*

*Didn't you see that players warm up their bodies by jumping prior to start playing in the stadium? Women's bodies are like an unsmooth playground. You have to level it at first by jumping on it*

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**Box 1****Advertisement 1 – FRODEX**

A unique Masculine tonic for the vital organs  
Frodex is an aphrodisiac and nervine tonic  
Frodex restores the depleted sexual power  
Frodex relieves limpness and weakness after coitus  
Frodex enhances retentive power  
Frodex removes mental depression  
Frodex has remarkable antioxidant property

**Advertisement 2 – LIBIDEX**

Libidex increases libido  
Libidex maintains youthful vigour  
Libidex is a natural aphrodisiac  
Libidex prevents premature ejaculation  
Libidex helps retentive power  
Libidex ensures pleasant orgasm & post coitus freshness  
Libidex relieves physical and mental exhaustion

(Source: *The Independent, Health and Medicine Journal*, 2 August 2010: 7; 15)

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*otherwise you will be defeated. I have read a choti book namely Debor Bhabir Oboidho Shomporko [illicit sexual relationship of a wife with her husband's younger brother]. It was written in that book.*

*I have heard and read in the choti books that honey, milk, eggs, black cumin oil, and garlic increase sexual power.*

*A real man can earn good money, look after his family and is sexually capable... If one is not able to perform then he is useless, even if he has lots of money.*

It is difficult to state this with certainty, but when some males were together there might have been a tendency to exaggerate the role of the 'real man'. A different qualitative study with lower-income but educated men in Dhaka city, found similar anxieties about sexual performance and some of our other surveys also found that there is constant anxiety around male sexual performance.

In 2007, we conducted a pilot survey of 693 married men who were asked to freely list (without prompting) some of the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) concerns they have about their bodies and health. Sixty per cent stated that they had SRH concerns, both biomedical (such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV/AIDS, and infertility) and psychosocial. In a follow-up survey of 311 married men and 303 informal providers, conducted in three rural and urban sites of Bangladesh, similar concerns were reported, with men prioritising treatment for psychosocial concerns (performance, loss of semen, penis size) over biomedical ones. The survey findings led to this current research, which aimed to understand the extent of men's sexual health concerns and the factors that shape and influence these concerns.

Bus terminals and city walls are littered with numerous messages on signboards, billboards and posters promoting 'cures' for STDs, premature ejaculation, impotence, ideal penis size and ways of enhancing sexual performance, which were routinely seen by men on their way to work and back. Some of the men also referred to popular leaflets and advertisements passed around on the street corners or advertised in magazines (see Box 1),<sup>8</sup> which clearly lays out the importance of sexual performance and the shame of premature ejaculation, which was viewed as 'less manly'.

Premature ejaculation was defined as the 'loss of semen' too soon after sex began, where men could only hold on for 'two to three minutes'. This was seen as a 'huge failure' and humiliating.

An array of providers, both formal and informal, provide services for men, who remain excluded from the public health sector that focuses on maternal and child healthcare. A Bangladesh Health Watch study in (2008) found that there has been a substantial increase in the numbers of unqualified allopathic providers during the past decade compared to the numbers of qualified or semi-qualified allopathic providers. For example, the number of unqualified allopathic providers (village doctors and pharmacies – drug store salespeople), at 24 per 10,000, has increased, and the density of traditional healers was found to be 64 per 10,000 population, compared with 5.4 per 10,000 population for physicians and 2.1 for nurses, and a large majority of the population rely on the informal and private sectors. Many of the local healers and traditional healers (*kabirajis*) sell tonics and various medicines bought from pharmacies.

### ***Hero or hijra (transgender)***

In many of the local and foreign pornographic materials, women were depicted as available and extremely sensuous, needing satisfaction for sexual urges that are stronger than those of men. Men shared the view that women were sexually voracious and unable to be satisfied even by two or three men, desiring sex constantly, and often requiring violent encounters to reach satisfaction. This is counter to existing discourses of South Asian women as submissive or virginal (Srivastava 2004).

Concerns about the failure to satisfy and its negative consequences were expressed frequently; for example, 'If my wife is not satisfied, she will get attracted to other males'. Family tensions and disharmony were mentioned as consequences of this: 'My wife will kick me away if I can't satisfy her'. Any sexual weakness was a sign of unmanliness and a strong man was understood in terms of his capacity to satisfy his wife and lovers sexually. Men remained anxious that if they were viewed or known to be sexually incapable, they would be gossiped about, made fun of and referred to as *hijra* (transgender) or 'half a man'. One man who was struggling with maintaining an erection reported after a long in-depth interview, 'My wife said to me, "so what is your problem? How long can we go on like this? You need to cure this problem!"' He looked resigned and sad during the conversation and seemed to blame himself for his failure to please his wife.

Some men shared stories of women leaving their husbands because of their inability to perform. Another male respondent shared how his wife had had sex with the neighbour on a few occasions, and given his own inability to satisfy her, he had accepted her behaviour and had never confronted her about the situation. While this case may be unusual, many men agreed that women had a right to expect 'sexually satisfying sex' and could leave their husbands if their sexual performance was inadequate.

While it is unclear whether women do leave their husbands in reality, anecdotal evidence from conversations and research suggests that a man's inability to have sex is sometimes given as a reason for a woman's infidelity or unhappiness in the home. Indeed, when newlyweds separate, women are blamed but suspicion is also cast on the man's ability to be a 'good' husband. In addition, the recent survey of 103 poor men and 106 poor women in the slums of Chittagong,<sup>9</sup> found that 35.9 per cent of the men strongly agreed with the statement that 'a man who can't satisfy his wife/partner sexually is not a real man', and almost double the number of women (69.8 per cent) strongly agreed with this statement.

### ***Defeating the female***

Male ideas about gender relations and sexual behaviour were also gleaned from the wider social and economic environment around them, where young men and women moved around with greater ease and there was greater interaction between them. As in India (Osella and Osella 2004), in Dhaka city movies and cinemas provide role models and fantasies for young men and women who want to mimic their hairstyles, clothes and mannerisms. Romantic plot lines and popular songs are memorised word for word and are an important reference point in their lives, shaping their

aspirations for relationships and their views of the opposite sex. Young working city women were reported as more vocal, demanding and romantically and sexually fickle by the men in the interviews.

Some men argued that, increasingly, city women were difficult to please and looked down at 'backward village males'. Many of the men in the informal discussions and a few in the interviews reported that one way to hold on to such women was to be able to sexually satisfy or 'defeat' them during sexual intercourse. The notion of 'defeat' was the ability to have women 'orgasm' before them, and in some interviews, men spoke of forcefully continuing sex till their partners/wives 'bled', or 'pleaded with them to stop', as this was the sign of 'women being defeated'. 'Defeating' a woman was viewed as a sexually pleasurable experience, and men referred to local magazines and pornographic films where 'forceful sex' was viewed as ideal and desired by females.

As some explained:

*If you can continue your game until the girl screams only then you will be treated as a real man. Have you seen the way the women scream and shout in the movies when the man is having sex with her?*

*I have a friend who works in garments and I think he is a real man, because he is physically healthy and sexually very strong. He always wins over his wife. One day he comes to me and says, 'I have fucked her so hard that she has forgotten the name of her father'. Continuously he has sex with his wife for 30 minutes. I think he is the real male, none of my friends are as strong as him.*

Males who were able to 'defeat' their wives during sexual intercourse were referred to as 'heroes', 'kings', 'super kings' and 'real real men', much like the actors in films they were in awe of. Being dominant was a quality associated with 'real men', and it was popularly understood that 'a real man should be sexually so powerful that women became scared seeing their sexual power' (See Khan *et al.* 2008).

## **Sex workers and sex positions**

### ***Why men buy sex***

The thousands of migrant men who come to Dhaka city looking for work are often separated from their wives and families. Access to sex workers is sought for companionship, to pass the time while waiting for work or for the next bus out of the city and sometimes for intimate relationships. The main concern was on pleasure after a hard day's work and not on condom use 'which can interrupt the flow of real sex', with little concern for the transmission of STDs. Men spoke about engaging in sex with sex workers before and during marriage, and almost all of the unmarried men spoke of visiting sex workers. It was generally accepted that premarital and extramarital sex with sex workers was normal for men who 'needed to have sex'. As one man commented, 'Who is a saint these days? Everybody experiences sex before marriage... Who likes to have a meal with the same curry everyday? It's enjoyable to have new sexual partners every day'. In Bangladesh, going to sex workers is the most common way of gaining sexual experience, since patriarchal and cultural norms place strict controls on the participation of adolescent girls in sexual relationships. As Chandiramani (1998) argues, there is the reinforcement of the notion of the wife as mother and ritual partner and the sex workers as the sexual mate.

### ***Buying sex, sharing sex workers***

A local cinema hall in one of the bus terminals was well known for its regular screening of pornographic films every night. The owners of the cinema centre place posters for mainstream films outside the building, to avoid any problems with legal authorities, and the local police station is paid off to ensure there are no raids. It was common knowledge that X-rated foreign films were regularly screened and male drivers, transport workers, construction workers, students and businessmen were the most common viewers. Passengers waiting for buses also went to the

movie theatre to pass the time. Male students from nearby schools and colleges frequently came to this hall to watch pornography. Sex workers were often found hanging around the cinema halls, and male passengers, either with a group of friends or alone, hired a sex worker and enjoyed oral sex and heavy petting while watching the films. Others rented a room for sex in the nearby cheap motels. One respondent related the benefits of sharing a sex worker:

*Sometimes I went to the hotel-based sex worker before my marriage to enjoy and fulfil my strong desire for sex... to also try different things... I went there many times with my friends. I was not married then, so I used to spend all my money on this... once my friend and I rented a room the entire night in a hotel in Fakirapul [to access hotel sex workers], I made a contract with a sex worker for 500 Taka. On that night my friend and I had sex with that sex worker six times, three times each between us. If you share with a friend, then your cost will be less. That's why we hired the girl at the same time so that we can do it cheaply.*

### **Pleasure and performance, not condoms**

In terms of learning about sexual positions from pornographic films and then trying them out on their partners, a few of the men did so with their wives, but a number of them mentioned reluctant wives and preferred to have anal sex and oral sex with sex workers, who were compliant and did not refuse their demands. One man said:

*If I ask my wife to pleasure me she doesn't like to do it. So I go to Jia Uddyan [a public park] and get my penis sucked by a maagi [prostitute]. I really like this and as my wife doesn't want to do it I have to go to hire a woman.*

The risky lifestyles of the men were evident in their comments about premarital and extramarital sex, and group sex, which often took place without condoms. Condoms were viewed as a barrier to pleasure. Concerns about STDs are relegated to a secondary role as men wanted to have pleasurable sex and be seen as able to perform sexually. Men also exchanged 'heroic' stories about how 'good' sexual performance even led to discounts with sex workers:

*I have heard from my friend that he who does sex for more than half an hour with a prostitute, the prostitute doesn't charge from him any money rather she gives some extra money to that customer for a treat and requests him to visit again with a commitment of free service.*

While this may be a complete fantasy, and contradicts the realities of sex workers' lives, it is clear that this statement highlights how men believe that women love males who can have sex for a long time, even if this is about the idea of being a man and has little to do with the woman's actual reality. In all the discussions, men are so caught up in wanting to be a sexual 'hero', that disease prevention is barely mentioned, with the focus on performance.

# Conclusions

Rapid urbanisation and social transformations have created unintended consequences. The migration and increasing mobility of a labour force of males and females who earn low wages has taken place alongside a burgeoning sex industry and influx of pornography, which men are taking advantage of.

The findings of our study show how a man's intimate and private desires, sexual expectations and sexual realities are shaped by the larger social, political and economic structures. The popular media and the local and international pornography accessed through DVD players, the internet, mobile phones, magazines and news items – not available on this scale even a decade ago – have provided new images with which to imagine and perform relationships, sexual behaviour, intimacy and sexualities. Local and international pornography and an informal market economy facilitate a certain notion of masculinity, with implications for gender, power and sexual relationships and health.

The study also draws attention to the ways in which men and women are at risk of contracting STDs and HIV from men who may experiment with new types of sexuality outside of marriage and who are reluctant to use condoms. City life affords anonymity, and arrangements can easily be made by phone call or visiting a hotel with relatively little interference or fear of social repercussions. New forms of geographic mobility and labour migration in Bangladesh have provided men with frequent access to extramarital sexual relations, in similar ways to those noted by Phinney (2008) in Vietnam. It is not clear whether men feel pressured to engage in extramarital relations even if they do not want to, but it was viewed as an acceptable masculine norm, which places them and their wives and other partners at greater risk.

The emerging landscape in the city's transportation hubs now includes a wide array of spaces where men can go for sexualised encounters with women, to purchase, read and watch erotic and X-rated films and thereby learn from and live out their sexual lives, with implications for sexual health and wellbeing. Condemning pornography and pushing messages of sex workers as harmful and risky will not change these realities. Instead, we must incorporate messages on sexual behaviour in positive and accurate ways, demystify the masculine and feminine ideals and norms promoted in X-rated films and the media, promote more pleasurable ways of using condoms and encourage their use with both spouses and in extramarital relations. We need a positive pornography that shows the pleasures of consensual sex and safer sex, and that shows that men can give pleasure whatever the size of their penis. Lessons must be learned from these realities to feed into strategies for sexuality education and sexual information and education programmes that will positively impact on gender relations and behaviours.

# Notes

- 1 'Does Dhaka need Rickshaws?', *BBC News*, 20 July 1998, see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/136074.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/136074.stm) (accessed 27 September 2006).
- 2 Center for Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS, at the James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. For any correspondence, please email: [sabina@bracu.ac.bd](mailto:sabina@bracu.ac.bd).
- 3 US\$1 = Taka 78.
- 4 The Hindi film industry has transformed the way that women are portrayed on film. Whereas in the past film heroines were models of 'chastity and purity', there is a new emerging 'genre' of skin flicks that display heroines in slinky costumes and heroes without shirts on with buffed bodies ([bbcnews.com/southasia](http://bbcnews.com/southasia)).
- 5 While the report of having sex three times may be exaggerated, it highlights the pressure to be a virile male and reinforces the notion of the insatiable female.
- 6 Unpublished research, data being analysed (2010).
- 7 Many refer to pornographic movies as *blue* films.
- 8 The advertisement was in a leading English news magazine, on its back cover.
- 9 Unpublished research, data being analysed (2010).



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Over the past two decades Bangladesh's capital has grown from a small city to a large urbanised space. Such rapid urbanisation and social transformation has created unintended consequences that have implications for gender, power, sexual relationships and health.

Drawing on research undertaken over several months in the backstreets of Dhaka, this publication sheds new light on the city's changing economic and sexual landscape. Migration and the rapid mobility of a labour force of men and women who earn low wages have taken place alongside a burgeoning sex industry and influx of pornography which men particularly are taking advantage of. This study reveals how local ideas of sex and sexuality are gradually being transformed; how emerging urban spaces in the city are serving as alternative sites of communication, knowledge and information on sex; and how men's sexual expectations and realities are shaped by larger social, political and economic structures.

The authors argue that lessons learnt from these changing sexual realities must feed into strategies for sex education programmes in order to positively impact on gender relations and ultimately contribute to a vision of development which increases possibilities for wellbeing and pleasure in relationships and life, in conjunction with efforts to tackle poverty.