

CHAPTER III

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MALE-TO-MALE SEX

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Introduction

This chapter offers a global description of the socio-cultural construction of relations and practices among gay and other «men who have sex with other men» (MSM) in Latin America, chiefly in urban contexts, since the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

This chapter aims to cover a wide geographical area in the region; however, the reader should be aware that the diversity of civil society actions, the inconsistent fashion in which they have been recorded, and the limited dissemination of specialized publications on this subject, undermine any pretension at a truly exhaustive study, and it is highly likely that there is information that has been overlooked and which will have to be included later.

In every country in the region there are published studies and ongoing research on the issues of gender identities and sexuality -particularly since the end of the 1980's- which constitute a source of material for literary research.

The search for analytical background information on the situation of homoerotic relations and practices in various databases was hampered by the absence of up-to-date syntheses of national or regional data and, furthermore, by the use of a wide range of methodologies and theories to address the issue. The foregoing severely hampered the comparability of aspects of the private and public lives of individuals and groups identified in a broad gamut of male and female homosexualities.

An exhaustive exploration of the issue in this chapter is also impossible because homosexual relations and practices may be examined from a multitude of perspectives. The above is particularly true when one considers that in Latin America HIV/AIDS research has not covered a number of important areas of clinical and epidemiological study. In particular, socio-cultural studies have played a peripheral role in the scientific response to the AIDS epidemic, even though this situation is changing with respect to promotion of socio-cultural research on sexuality in the 1990's, thus altering the previous position (Cáceres and Rosasco, 2000).

Sexual Diversity in Latin America

Western societies have sought to universalise their hostility or antagonism towards persons of a homosexual, bisexual or lesbian orientation, by treating them, until near the end of the last century, as if they suffered from a psychiatric complaint (until 1973, when it was eliminated from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM)), or by criminalizing such behaviour. In fact, each of the terms of identification mentioned has a connotation that is currently recognized, and they do not pertain to mere technical descriptions of behaviour nor are they appropriate in all cultures and countries.

Some countries in the Americas still impose legal and non-legal prohibitions on non heterosexual sexual and emotional expressions. However, increasingly, cultural definitions and standards in the area of sexuality, reproduction and man-woman gender relations, are changing or being discussed publicly. In this framework, towards the end of the 20th century, in different countries in the region there were a number of indications of change in the social and academic visibility of homosexual practices and relations in the population: for instance, the abolition of laws in Ecuador and Chile that made it a crime for persons of the same sex to engage in sexual relations (*International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission - IGLHRC*, 2000); an increase in the publication of studies on sexuality and gender relations (*Balderston and Guy*, 1998); the inclusion of the issues of sexual diversity and the HIV/AIDS epidemic as matters for debate in public agendas; the emergence of civil society organizations that began to publicize the existence of ways of experiencing same-sex sexuality and affection that do away with tradition, culture, and legal restrictions; and the implementation of community AIDS prevention programs and support for people with AIDS (*Whitlock*, 1992).

Studies have been conducted to examine different factors that explain this change in favour of public expression of forms of homosexuality, bisexuality and lesbianism not only at the regional, but also at the international level (Castells, 1999). In this framework, local and generalizing labels such as «gay», «homosexual», «bisexual» and «sexual minorities» appear to be part of the mass phenomena of western societies, in that they propose a distinction with respect to the sexuality and affections of individual and groups belonging to the «majority». That distinction suggests the impossibility of autonomy for the «sexual minorities» category – or for others that presuppose an incomplete person – and the existence of a «majority» in society, the latter understood as the whole that determines the conduct of the individual and arises from the relationship between the cultural, economic, social, and political systems, all contained within territorially and legally conceived borders. In this perspective, social and political dimensions eclipse opportunities for civil visibility of sexual diversity given their aims for nationwide scope and their legal frames of reference.

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However, increasingly, the notion of society as the frame of reference for establishing uniform, separate, or fixed identities is questioned by social scientists in the region, particularly since the combined effect has been felt of globalising processes that extinguish the sense of borders and endogenous centres of decision making and negotiation. This change has been attributed to two factors connected with the economic globalisation of the hemisphere that have altered the cultural map of Latin America: social and political opening-up in the domestic sphere, and integration processes undertaken by the region's countries in order to compete in the new world market, suggesting articulation between market developments and national states. One of the most significant changes that has resulted from this is the demographic movement from rural to urban areas. This process has created a «heterogeneous urban cultural weft composed of a dense multicultural assortment of threads which, despite the differences in ways of life and of thinking, in structures for feeling and narration, communicate very well with each other. It is a multicultural assortment that challenges the frames of reference and understanding forged from clear-cut, deep-rooted, and clearly segmented identities» (Martín-Barbero, 2000).

In the area of cultural studies it has become clear that that articulation between state and market fuels rising inequality in Latin America, which led to social fragmentation, undermined mechanisms of social and political cohesion, and eroded the symbolic and emblematic representations of nationhood. Those spaces of collective representation contained strong gender biases and discriminatory public expressions on sexual diversity, and their break-up has permitted the inclusion of innovative imagery and meanings that have not necessarily originated within the country itself but from a process of integration and exclusion brought about by globalisation (*García Canclini, 1995; Brunner, 1998*).

Research is needed throughout the region on the globalisation of communications, especially as regards the relationship between the media and information technologies and gay/lesbian people and groups. Recently this has resulted in a fruitful use of information technologies by these groups, reinforcing processes of change in sexual, social, political, and other imageries and representation forums, as well as leading to the creation of *gay cybercommunities* with multiple interests and options for communication that share a temporal proximity even if physically distant. One feature of the cultural globalisation processes is deterritorialization and a change in the conception of time (*Ortiz, 1994*). This situation enables rapid communication, especially through the media of cultural phenomena from the global level to the local or regional level. Thus, in the latter, shared and unifying traditions and frames of reference, such as, for instance, sexual ideologies and religious precepts are confronted, investigated or questioned by the media, with a view to discussing comparatively the basis of their value and their validity, beyond the specific contexts of time and place of origin (*Brunner, 1998*).

The relations between the media (television, radio, and print) and gay/lesbian organizations tend to be contradictory to the extent that the genuine presence of the issue of homosexuality in terms of its codification and symbolic transgression is questioned; and yet, at the same time, it is an increasingly profitable media commodity in the entertainment or fiction genres. In Peru, Angélica Motta says that in the 1990's the cultural construction of the «*gay scene*» as a collection of networks of relations, social settings, dynamics and symbols pertaining to homosexual people in Lima, «*has undergone quite dynamic growth and change, and very little is known about it from a social-science point of view. Mainly, it has been the media that has taken it upon itself to reveal, to some extent, part of its dynamic through talk shows, news programs and newspapers, as well as providing coverage whenever there is a raid by the police or municipal authorities on gay discotheques. However, such reporting is partial and biased due to the prejudice that exists towards a population that has been highly stereotyped and on which there is very little serious information*» (1999:429).

Analysis of press coverage

A study conducted on the content of issues published between 1988 and 1991 of *El Imparcial*, one of the longest-standing and most widely read newspapers in the city of Hermosillo, Mexico, made it possible to observe opinions on such issues as sexuality, pornography, homosexuality, marriage, sexual liberation, eroticism, prostitution and AIDS. The findings of the study revealed the existence of a discourse with strong religious and medical components used to organize censorship of desire, pleasure, and the body. This medium, embodies the representations and discourses found in families, the Catholic Church, media and civil society organizations, especially those with links to the Catholic Church, and they are materialized in codes and rules.

The main features of this discourse include affirmations that biological reproduction is the only legitimate reason for sexual intercourse and that sex is only justifiable within wedlock; a denial of sexual pleasure outside the context of reproductive sex; and a strong insistence on genitality as the natural rationale for heterosexuality as the norm. Accordingly, any practice not consistent with these principles is censured on moral and medical grounds; the morality that supports this position is steeped in Christian values and is advanced over the opinion of the majority as a core principle; homosexuality is associated with a «suspect nature», «personality problems», prostitution and crime; and love is only conceived as possible between heterosexuals.

The result is that the newspaper becomes a mouthpiece for the dominant discourse on sexuality in the local culture, and, therefore, it is so rooted in conventional wisdom that it assumes that discourse to be logical and unquestionable. From what the researcher has observed, dominant representations generate a «panoptic» effect because they are always observing, censoring and punishing any «excess». This device is activated when the newspaper addresses the issue of homosexuality, producing representations that focus on public presence or private invisibility. Thus, it calls *discreet homosexuals* those who (...) keep up a heterosexual appearance, from whom one would expect chastity, and *brazen homosexuals* those who try to stand out or be conspicuous, transvestites, drag queens.

Source: Guillermo Núñez Noriega. ***Sexo entre Varones. Poder y resistencia en el campo sexual***, Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género, Universidad Autónoma de México, Mexico, 2000.

This ideological process makes male homosexuals particularly critical of information on AIDS and it is the permanent backdrop for any evaluation of the virus and its transmission (Torres, 1997:24). This critical posture has been strengthened by their impression of the media's handling of such information, particularly television in its role as the shaper of social reality; thus, homosexuals currently «do not exist» as a stricken population.

This perception held by gay men that the media conceal homosexuality and negate their existence is consistent with the opinion of the heterosexual population that appearances of homosexuals on television are unacceptable. A FLACSO survey in 1998 found that around 60% of the population (men and women) over the age of 18 in Santiago, Chile, thought it unacceptable for prostitutes and homosexuals to be interviewed on television. However, technically, the way the survey findings are presented makes it hard to tell precisely if that percentage refers to homosexuals, prostitutes, or both; it also leads one to wonder about the criteria that permit collection of those data without reproducing social stereotypes or prejudices (FLACSO, 1998).

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In broad terms, the enormous variety of socio-cultural practices and intra-regional overlaps in Latin America create a panorama so complex that it is impossible to examine the day-to-day existence of men and women in the region from a cultural perspective. On the other hand, social science research has stressed the importance of understanding human sexuality, which is no longer a product «...of our biological nature but of the cultural and social schemes that mould not only our sexual experience, but also the ways in which we interpret and understand that experience. This vision of sexuality and of sexual activity as social constructs draws attention to the inter-subjective nature of sexual meanings, (and) their collective and shared qualities, not as belonging to isolated individuals, but to social persons integrated

in the context of a variety of different sexual cultures. From that perspective, the subjective experience of a sex life is understood, literally, as a product of the inter-subjective meanings and symbols associated with sexuality in different social and cultural situations» (Parker, 1996:15).

I

dentities, behaviours and cultures

The emergence of homosexuality or gay styles as a sexual category in the 1980's and 1990's in Latin America, cannot be no be interpreted to mean the non-existence of complex subcultures in urban areas that, as mentioned in the case of Brazil, have a historical depth that harks back to the beginnings of the 20th century (Parker, 1998). We talk about a «gay world», which encounters, on one hand the sex and gender relations and system at the popular level, and, on the other discourses on rationalized sexual identity, as well as incorporates the diverse contexts of the urban universe and, increasingly, commercial establishments that cater to the homosexual population and provide places for them to meet and recognize one another, as well as containing a host of connotations connected with the ritual of consumption. In some cities an industry has developed, providing entertainment and private premises for homosexual men and women, such as bars, dance halls, restaurants and cinemas.

Realization of the recent expansion of forms of representing identity in the realm of sexual diversity and the multicultural depth of the region's countries, has led us to question the use of the main categories of sexual identity in the Latin American cultural context –homosexuality, bisexuality and heterosexuality– especially in the framework of HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns and the different fields of epidemiological research. These categories do not necessary represent in any meaningful way homoerotic identities and practices in given national, economic, socio-cultural, or linguistic contexts, but may come to embody, at an interpersonal level, other definitions and experiences (Rodríguez, 2000).

Adherence to these and other categories that assume a direct causal relationship between sexual desire, sexual behaviour and identity has been cast into doubt since the transcultural study began of male homosexual interactions, which revealed the diversity and complexity of, and discrepancies between, behaviour and alternative sexual identity (Parker, 1996). Other categories were similarly questioned; for instance, the term «lesbian», which covers a galaxy of affective and sexual identities and experiences in women that may be alien in certain cultural or



A recreation of sexual diversity in the traditional Mexican context. Archives of Letra S.

linguistic contexts (Rosenbloom, 1997). This also concerns those cultural generalizations about the «*Latin American man*» or «*latin macho*», which blur the differences, complexities and subtleties of masculinities and men's day-to-day experiences (Ramírez, 1993; Gutmann, 1996).

Several research efforts draw attention to the complex relationship between meanings of sexual roles, gender roles, and identity, in particular in the case of male transvestites, who experience a «*dissidence of identity*». In other words, identity is not only moulded from univocally codified elements of a paternal male culture, but also from the fluid, uncoded subjectivity of the feminine (Facuse, 1998). A study in Costa Rica observed men who professed to be heterosexuals and sought the services of transvestites in order to have penetrative sex, and who want «a man who is 100% man», regardless of other manifestations of masculinity (Schifter, 1998).

This identity dissidence from the «binary» macrocodes (for example, passive/active) is found in the world of male prostitution, which is weakly institutionalised compared to that of heterosexual female prostitution, «*occupying an indistinct*,

intermediate space between axiomatic obedience to the rules of the code and a certain pseudolibertinistic nomadism that moves through the meanders of the 'cities of the night'.» (Perlongher, 1999:221).

In certain contexts there is a very visible association between sexual roles («passive» and «active») and sexual and personal identities. A qualitative study in Nicaragua found that in the opinion of homosexual men those who played the penetrative role in sexual intercourse were not homosexuals. The rules on sexual roles and behaviours tend to be strict, to such an extent that the term «*rechivuelta*», which alludes to those who adopt both a passive and active role in sexual intercourse, is the worst insult for a homosexual man (Aráuz, 1997). In Mexico, for its part, some studies reveal that a man who plays the receptive or passive partner in sex «is no better than a woman» and is treated accordingly (Carter, 1995). By contrast, in some countries, the younger sex workers do not regard certain sexual practices among males (like anal or oral sex) as a sign of homosexuality (Vásquez and Ruiz, 1990).

It is precisely the homoerotic experiential order that refers to situational contexts that are not merely socio-cultural or political in nature, to use the daily language concept developed by Halliday (1986). This appears to make possible identity, relational and behavioural codes, which, though they may be repeatedly updated, are permanently exposed to the possibility of discrepancies, uncertainties and risks. A specific situation that concerns MSM occurs in the case of institutions where men are confined together without the possibility of having sexual or affective encounters with women, such as prisons or the armed forces. In these organizations cultural and psychosocial processes take place that give meaning and shape to homoerotic experiences, in which the sexual cultures of the population become mixed amid resistances and complex changes, and HIV/AIDS prevention measures are hindered by not only institutional but also socio-cultural barriers (Schifter, 1997).

Based on a review of literary material on the situation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic among men who have sex with other men in Latin America and the Caribbean, Cáceres and Chequer (2000) say that the studies focusing on men identified as gay sought to summarize explanations advanced for the «*unsafe*» behaviour that continued to be reported despite the large amounts of technical information available to the study subjects:

- HIV/AIDS prevention messages lost sight of the complexity of the reasons that lead people to engage in sex, as well as the emotional meanings that are attached to it.

- It would be frequent to feel that suggesting condom use might be either offensive or too difficult because of the complex interpretations which that might give rise to.
- It would appear that unprotected sex is regarded as allowing greater closeness between couples and for that reason it is thought that it should be the «norm» with the steady partner («*steady partner*» is also a hazy category, and for many one week is sufficient to qualify in that regard).
- The potential risk of partners can apparently be determined from their «healthy» or «unhealthy» appearance. This approach appears to follow traditional aesthetic categories and is used by many to decide with whom unprotected sex is possible.
- Unrealistic views have spread with respect to the absence of risk connected with insertive, as opposed to receptive, anal sex.
- Some people appear to have misunderstood the purpose of HIV testing and to think it is a preventive measure that is virtually an alternative to protected sex, rather than a source of auxiliary information.
- Low self-esteem associated with inner conflict over acceptance of sexuality, coupled with a clandestine form of sexual experience, particularly if facilitated by alcohol or other recreational drugs, could hamper the cognitive and emotional capacity of the subject to take preventive measures.
- Given the long natural history of HIV infection, the risk it poses is apparently seen as more applicable to those persons who feel they have more to protect and attach greater importance to health in their lives in general.
- In all local societies, many men feel, to a greater or lesser extent, that they have a social duty to marry, regardless of their sexual interests, which appears to lead to situations of forced bisexuality, clandestine sexual experiences, and low self-esteem.
- Many of the physical environments where men engage in clandestine homosexual intercourse (i.e., streets, parks, cars, cinemas, saunas) would appear to make it difficult to include condom use, given that there are other risks present; furthermore speed of action is viewed as a necessity. Therefore, it may be necessary to create alternative settings, ideally with information on prevention available.
- Perceived social standards regarding the «*obligatory nature*» of preventive recommendations are apparently important in determining whether or not an individual feels comfortable with following them.
- Educational strategies should consider the experiential and socio-cultural diversity of MSM, and, in particular, the fact that some are ready for direct messages, while other might require an elliptical approach.

- The creation of gay communities and in general, cultural settings designed to enable development of positive homosexual identities from an early stage would help MSM to develop better outlooks on the value of their lives and, therefore, lead them to make a greater effort to preserve them.

Educational material produced by the Homosexualities Project (Brasil), which addresses bisexuality. Archives of ABIA.



The dichotomies of gender and sexual identity in bisexuals in Mexico, can apparently be explained by the importance of a family-based culture where the possibility of not getting married and having children is inconceivable for most men due to rigid social principles (Carter, 1995). In the Dominican Republic, a bibliographic review of the state of research in 1996 (De Moya and García, 1996) concluded that bi-eroticism, bisexual behaviour, and bisexuality seem to be intrinsic to the social construction of masculinity and of gender roles among many Dominican males, although public recognition as the receptive partner in homosexual sex carries a strong stigma.

In the sexual identity development process many young men experience a conflict of approach/rejection that confuses bonding with competition between, and domination of, members of their own sex, and tends to encourage among men a considerable amount of impulsive clandestine behaviour, leading them to deceive their female partners and to be unfaithful to male ones, in practices that generate fleeting ties of affection, guilt, and denial. These local ideologies on masculinity and stereotypical gender relations appear to encourage male homosexual prostitution in Santo Domingo by strengthening relations of domination in the exchange of sex for money (*De Moya and García, 1998*).

This discrepancy between homoerotic practices and identities is reflected by the understatement of male homo/bisexual practices in national sexual behaviour surveys, given the answers provided to the question about self-identification as homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. There is a lack of congruity with epidemiological data on HIV transmission in the area of sexual exposure category, which, in 1999 in Chile, for instance, suggested that homo/bisexual men accounted for 71% of cases (*Government of Chile – Ministry of Health, 2000*).

An illustrative example of the invisibility and variety of homoerotic practices can be seen in certain stereotypically male job categories where the prevalence of sex among men has been investigated. Studies on male-to-male sex among long-distance truck drivers in Central America, for example, found prevalences ranging from 3.6% in Honduras to 11% in El Salvador (Madrigal, 1998). Studies on subregions of Latin America have not provided detailed reports of movements between rural and urban areas, or between countries; however, in the Dominican Republic a high incidence of sex tourism between cities was observed in a sample of 188 men aged 17 to 47 (*Ramah, 1992*).

As male-to-male sex is one of the determinants of the epidemic's configuration at the regional and international level, «...*the dominant social representations of homoeroticism and the way in which they interact with specific sexual practices are fundamental. In a 'macho' setting male status has constantly to be confirmed, and anything that threatens it symbolically is crudely stigmatised. Social exclusion of homosexuals (typified by homophobia), supported by society as a whole has only recently begun to undergo reversion, thanks to the increasing dissemination of values promoting respect for difference and sexual diversity, which are changing the official line but not the more entrenched attitudes, including those of institutions. The health system is a key example of the latter because it turns a social stigma into an obvious barrier to its services.*» (*Cáceres, 2002*).

Homoerotic experience and homosexual sociability

In the specialized literature on the subject, homoerotic experiences and practices in certain contexts have received more attention than modalities of coexistence, such as construction of ties of friendship, partner relationships, the homosexual family, employment, or citizenship.

For example in discussions in political and academic circles on the family, the existence of a homosexual family is located at the point of coalescence of issues such as the sex/reproduction divide; the fact that the married life is no longer based on a relationship dependent on economic and social reproduction conditions; and the questioning of the belief that kinship requires procreation and that «*non biological*» ties should be shaped according to a biological model. One of the results of this type of family is the construction of non-procreational sexual identities and the image of blood as a biogenetic symbol of procreation, to which the notion of «*choice and creativity*» is opposed (Bestard, 1998).

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Furthermore, a number of studies indicate that male-to-male sex in public places in the cities of Latin America, is among the practices that entail the highest levels of disguise, repression and discrimination, and little is known about it in the social sciences. This practice combines elements of transgression of moral codes and public sexual discourses (Mendoza, 1998), and reflects hierarchies and relations of domination associated with hegemonic gender constructs (Schifter and Vargas, 1998). In such practices, the conflictive association between gender identities and sexual behaviours is not found to be what some studies indicate; such is the case of an exploratory study based on participant observation and a survey of sex workers in the steam baths of Mexico City, which concludes that none of the men interviewed reported conflict between their identity and their sexual behaviour; nor did any describe himself as homosexual or bisexual. They reported that their place of «*initiation*» of sex with men had been the steam baths, sometimes at the encouragement of close friends or relatives (Hernández, 1997).

According to a study conducted in Peru (*Cáceres and Rosasco, 1997*), there is a consistent connection between sex in public places, such as streets, parks and other locations and high risk sexual behaviour. In the study the report on sex in public places consistently predicted the presence of high-risk behaviour according to two indicators: (a) unprotected receptive anal sex, and (b) a risk behaviour index based on number of sexual partners in practices of varying risk levels.

FONOSIDA is a free and anonymous service created by the Ministry of Health of Chile in order to facilitate people's access to information, orientation and personalized support regarding HIV/AIDS and its prevention.

A study of calls received during 1999 determined a total of 54,042, with a monthly average of 4503 calls completed. On the basis of data provided by the hotline users, 73.4% of them are heterosexual (67.9% of men and 91.2% of women); 6.4% are bisexual (7.4% of men and 3.1% of women), and 20.2% are homosexual (24.6% of men and 5.8% of women).

Information is requested on ways of HIV transmission, HIV prevention, HIV testing, use of condoms, and AIDS symptoms. Most men call when they perceive themselves at risk for HIV or when they are HIV positive, while most women call because they distrust their partners, or because they live in proximity to somebody living with HIV/AIDS.

Risk Practices

Practices that pose risk for HIV infection (particularly unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex, which represent 68% of sexual practices reported by hotline users) are frequent. Sex with strangers is reported by 55% of men and 21% of women.

Sexual practices according to reported sexual orientation are:

RISK PRACTICES	HETEROSEXUAL	BISEXUAL	HOMOSEXUAL	TOTAL
	TASA	TASA	TASA	TASA
Unprotected vaginal penetration	57,7	31,6	6,9	45,8
Unprotected oral sex	15,8	34,3	28,1	19,5
Unprotected anal sex	3,7	37,4	47,2	14,6
Other	2,3	2,5	2,1	2,3
Sharing a syringe	0,2	0,3	0,1	0,2
Sharing a dildo	0,1	0,6	0,3	0,2
Receiving a transfusion	0,1	-	0,1	0,1
No information	0,2	1,4	-	0,2
Total	80,2	108,0	84,8	82,9

The most important sexual practice among self-reported homosexual persons is anal penetration, while among self-reported bisexuals it is anal sex followed by vaginal sex, and among heterosexuals it is vaginal sex. Similarly, the study uses an index to relate high- and low-risk practices for all those practices in which using a condom can reduce risk. According to such index, 3.5 unprotected episodes of vaginal sex occur per act of protected vaginal sex, while the figures are 2.9 for anal sex and 17.5 for oral sex.

Source: Ministry of Health, CONASIDA (1999). Analysis of Service Records of the FONOSIDA Hotline. January-December 1999. Santiago: MINSAL/CONASIDA.

Homosexuality as a minority experience in Latin America

There has been significant progress in the construction of social movements and of an institutional structure composed of NGOs, welfare organizations, and grassroots gay groups in Latin America, providing a foundation for sociability and promotion of recognition and citizenship experiences. However, there is still considerable mainstream rejection against the public presence of gay men and lesbians and, in some countries serious violations of their human rights, according to Amnesty International (1994), in particular extrajudicial executions and forced disappearance of persons identified as homosexuals. These grave violations of fundamental rights are serious are closely connected with police control and repression measures in places of recreation, such as discotheques or bars, which are frequently reported in various countries in the region without the victims being afforded clear opportunities for their defence (Montalvo, 1997).

In Chile, various opinion polls and qualitative studies have shown that the majority of the population tends to reject homosexual men involved in culture-reproducing institutions, such as schools, the armed forces, television, and politics (Guajardo, 2000). In a 1997 study to measure tolerance and discrimination among members of the Chilean public over the age of 18, the chief object of intolerance and discrimination was homosexuality, coming before ethnic discrimination, the death penalty, and other issues (Fundación Ideas, 1997). In Argentina, a substantial segment of the population of Buenos Aires stated their rejection of homosexuality, citing both personal feelings and moral, socio-political and even medical and psychological considerations (Kornblit, Pecheny, Vujosevich, 1998).

The experiences of belonging to a sexual minority and of discrimination or social intolerance unite individuals with their own bodies in a relationship of self-aggression and self-inflicted violence. Thus, in a hostile social environment suicide may be legitimized in the homosexual experience because it is represented not as a source of life but as a generator of death. One example of this can be seen in the positive view taken of suicide by some 30% of lesbians and bisexual women in Costa Rica, according to a 1999 study made by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC).

Given the cultural legitimacy of the death of certain persons due to their extreme corporalisation, it is fair to say that the body is always inscribed in an experience that forms part of the identity of the person and can attain articulation in the reflexive unification of the multiplicity of elements of the life of an individual (Pérez Cortes, 1991). Non-alienating exercise of corporality entails having access to

items of reference that place bodies in a context where they can find formulae for survival, independence or subversion, instead of using generalizing examples or labels that limit the plurality of human life.

Despite its considerable presence in the region, however, depending on social background, homophobia creates different reactions in the population, owing to different ways of understanding homosexuality (Cáceres and Rosasco, 2000). *«In the middle class world it is viewed from a traditional medical or psychiatric perspective, under which any sexual contact between men implies homosexuality; in that context, many homosexually oriented men from such a background choose to marry and engage in homosexual sex sporadically or concomitantly; and in connection with the clandestine nature of that activity some have acquired HIV/AIDS and transmitted it to their female partners. By contrast, low-income urban sectors have tended to cling to a traditional stance towards homosexuality based on gender roles under the Herdt classification (1997): in that framework, homosexuals would be interpreted as men who renounce their masculinity and behave like women, which is why they ‘naturally’ want to have sex with (real) men.»* (Cáceres, 2002).

In low-income sectors, that fact that a man should have sex with another man in exchange for various kinds of payment does not undermine their masculinity (Motta, 1999). *«This model, then, leads to a high prevalence of bisexual behaviour among men who do not identify themselves as bisexual¹ nor feel diminished as «men»; the frequency with which these exchanges occur with alcohol present, as well as the low acceptability of condoms results in a stream of HIV infections from «homosexual» men to these men who engage in bisexual behaviour and to their female partners.»* (Cáceres, 2002).

According to the assessments mentioned there are trends in the countries of the region towards increased visibility of homoerotic identities, relations and practices and towards the universal legalization of male homosexuality and, to a lesser degree, female homosexuality.

Laws have not necessarily assured peaceful and respectful coexistence with homosexual persons and groups in the region's countries, and there is a need for educational, communicational, and legal strategies aimed at restoring their dignity as persons and full citizens. To the contrary, there are illegal arrests and harassment, as well as the persistence of stereotypes and social restrictions that prevent the possibility of instituting legal action in defence against acts of discrimination and defamation committed against gay men or lesbians (Ahumada and Sánchez, 2000).

¹ Which unquestionably has a bearing on the language used in prevention campaigns.

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CHAPTER IV

VULNERABILITY OF GAY MEN AND OTHER MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN TO THE HIV/AIDS EPIDEMIC IN LATIN AMERICA: THE OTHER SIDE OF MASCULINITY

José Toro-Alfonso

Introduction

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a disproportionately heavy impact on gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM). Epidemiological data for most Latin American countries indicate that these groups are the most severely affected. Despite the fact that countries like Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Brazil report a spiralling rise in cases of heterosexual transmission, the male homosexual population continues to represent a very significant proportion of people infected with the virus (*UNAIDS, 2001a*).

Bearing in mind that homosexuality is not accepted in many countries in the region, it is not difficult to see why, even in countries that have reported fewer cases among MSM since the start of the epidemic, the HIV/AIDS epidemic might increase the consequences of publicly coming out of the closet. The inescapable fact remains that throughout the world the homosexual, bisexual and transgendered population has been exceptionally affected by this epidemic.

This is one of the reasons why at the start of the epidemic the connection was made between AIDS and the gay lifestyle. Consequently, idea arose that homosexual people had not only their own lifestyle, but now their own particular diseases as well¹.

Furthermore, the disease was clearly having a powerful impact on the gay community and an effective response was needed to this situation. Led by members of the gay community, different groups were organized to raise funds for research, implement educational programs, and provide support to people with the disease. Doubtless this was one reason why the disease continued to be associated, either exclusively or predominantly, with homosexuality.

Ironically it was the epidemic that helped the world recognize the diversity of homosexual cultures. Important celebrities and public figures told the news media that they were infected with AIDS and had been homosexual all their lives.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the epidemic continues to be the most important cause of death among MSM (including many young people) throughout the hemisphere. Despite the enormous amount of research carried out to understand the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic and its infection and transmission mechanisms, the disease remains present across broad sectors of our society (*Izazola, Astarloa, Belloqui, Bronfman, Chéquer and Zacarías, 1999*).

«Sex between men exists in most societies. HIV prevention programmes for men who have sex with men (MSM) are hindered by denial that sexual behaviour between men takes place.» (UNAIDS, 2001, p.2)

A whole array of factors makes the homosexual population an ongoing and almost favoured target of this epidemic. In terms of biological makeup, there are no conditions that make MSM particularly predisposed to HIV infection. Therefore, we should be looking at other factors that make this population vulnerable. Understanding and taking account of these vulnerabilities could be the answer for implementing intervention programs that will succeed where the millions of dollars invested to date have not.

¹ As we know, for a time, AIDS was referred to as the «gay plague» or the «pink plague».

I ndividual vulnerability

Numerous research efforts on HIV vulnerability among men who have sex with men have identified various individual factors, such as levels of self-esteem, internalised homophobia, intimacy problems, among others (*Schifter, 1998*).

Without going into the structural factors that cause these vulnerabilities, we cannot overlook the fact that there are individual factors that can contribute to an increase in risk behaviour among gay men and other men who have sex with men. Several studies mention sexual abuse during childhood as an element that may contribute to difficulties establishing boundaries and the necessary intimacy in relationships (*Carballo-Diéguez, 1996*). In the United States some studies have found that (particularly Hispanic) men who said that they had unwanted sex during childhood have a higher frequency of high-risk sexual behaviour as adults, a larger number of sexual partners, greater involvement in sex work, and problems with alcohol and drug abuse (*Dilorio, Hartwell and Hansen, 2002*).

Furthermore, the establishment of relations of power and control with co-dependence indicators has also been identified as an individual vulnerability factor in some MSM sectors (*Schifter, 1998; Toro-Alfonso, 2000*).

Another important aspect in the personal processes of MSM is the impact of their own perception of their sexuality. Some authors say that homophobia can be an enormous obstacle in the development of safe sexual behaviour (*Toro-Alfonso, 1997*). Levels of internalised homophobia may be related to a person's comfort with their sexuality and establishing proper relationships (*Pharr, 1997; Schifter, 1998*).

People with low self-esteem tend to try to seek acceptance in indirect ways. It is very common for many gay men to invest of lot of time trying to please others, listening, and acting as counsellors, therapists, mediators, and defenders of their family. It has been found that individuals who engage in safer sex have higher self-esteem, experience less anxiety or depression and fewer behavioural problems, and consume smaller quantities of alcohol than those with unsafe patterns of conduct (*Rotheram-Borus, Rosario and Reid, 1992*).

Other studies have identified factors such as low perceived individual risk, health-related beliefs, and negotiation skills as important elements in individual HIV vulnerability in MSM.

Mays and Cochrane (2001) identified a high level of psychiatric morbidity in a sample of homosexual men taken in a representative national survey of adults in the United States. Homosexual participants reported greater discrimination than their heterosexual counterparts; 42% percent of them related discrimination to sexual orientation. The researchers found that perceived discrimination was associated with a low quality of life and with high levels of psychiatric morbidity.

Structural vulnerability

Herek and his collaborators (1999; 1997) have conducted multiple studies relating the stigma associated with the disease and the vulnerability of this sexual minority to the epidemic. The issues of discrimination against and stigmatisation of MSM lead us, therefore, to other dimensions of vulnerability: not individual fragility but the social implications of sex between men and their impact on individual lives.

Right from the very start of the epidemic many organized groups of gay and MSM developed intervention models to deal with the impact of the epidemic on their community. Many of these interventions were aimed at reducing individual vulnerability. Despite the positive results of these interventions and early research efforts, it soon became clear that these vulnerabilities were contained in a structural dimension that had not been taken into account (Parker, 2000; Parker, Easton & Klein, 2000). Indeed, a relapse was detected in HIV incidence in those communities where individual interventions were implemented at the beginning of the epidemic.

«These recent developments have offered important new insights that have helped us to rethink the kind of oversimplistic oppositions that have traditionally characterized the cross-cultural analysis of homosexuality and gay life. In particular, they have moved us forward by breaking down earlier, monolithic, notions of «gay (and lesbian) community» in the Anglo-European world. By focusing on questions of internal difference, gender power, race and ethnicity, social class, and so on, such approaches have thus pushed in the direction of more dialectical understanding of the relationship between local contexts and cultures, on the one hand, and the broader social and historical processes, on the other.» (Parker, 1999, p.9)

It was at that point that the examination of structural factors that cause, heighten, or influence the vulnerability of these communities became important. It was noted that one of the most significant factors is poverty (*González-Block & Liguori, 1992*). In many countries where the epidemic has had a disproportionately heavy impact on the MSM community a clear connection has been found between the spread of the epidemic and variables such as high levels of poverty, limited access to information and health services, and prevalence of the sex trade (*UNAIDS, 2000*).

We cannot overlook the social construction of sexuality that supports a heterosexual norm that excludes all other sexualities. Discrimination sustained by a univocal vision of masculinity and the way in which men should relate to each other forces men who have sex with men into individual and social exclusion. The very force of the hegemonic masculinity becomes the main cause of vulnerability in Latin American men who have sex with men.

Hegemonic masculinities and power

There is no doubt that gender transects a multiplicity of social relations, such as those of social class, race/ethnic background, and education. Gender as a way of organizing social practice is superimposed on the fate of biology for the precise reason that biology does not determine the social dimension (*Connell, 1987*). Social practice, on the other hand, is creative but not independent. It responds to specific situations and is generated within structures defined in the interior of social relationships.

These relationships are built on the central pillar of power relations that sustain female subordination and male dominance. This relationship structure paves the way for the imagery of a hegemonic masculinity, which no man really lives but from which we all obtain dividends. Hegemonic masculinity may be defined as follows:

«At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.» (Connell, 1995 pag. 87)

Connell, R.W. (1985) *Masculinities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

The debate on hegemonic masculinity places us in the dilemma of determining if in social relationships there are different masculinities or if they are all manifestations of the same one. And if, even though we might examine the supposed differences of, for instance, the masculinity of the labourer compared to that of the foreman, or that of the white man in relation to that of the subjugated man, all we will find are the same manifestations of male hegemony that is forcibly imposed on women based on their gender and their social position, regardless of their social category.

Violence as a manifestation: The vulnerability of power

And how are these manifestations imposed? Clearly through intimidation and violence. «*A completely legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate.*» (Connell, 1987, p. 45). Masculinity betrays its illegitimacy when imposed individually and socially as it has been for centuries.

The intimidation of women is achieved starting with the wolf whistle of supposed admiration in the street, progressing to harassment in the office, and culminating with rape and domestic battery. In each instance men achieve their aim of imposing their will slowly but surely, and, on occasions, with violence and brutality. After all, violence is the business of men... wars, murders, urban violence, youth gangs, among other examples. Everything would seem to indicate that living according to the codes of masculinity entails high-risk and violent self-destructive behaviour (Ramírez, 1999).

Others believe that, as there are few men who can claim to live a hegemonic masculinity, the result is high anxiety and a sense of impotence. They also say that the force of hegemonic masculinity as a male stereotype is the result of a biased view of men, since it does not permit displays of suffering on their part and they may succumb to the weight of imposed masculinity (Rivera-Medina, 1991). The fact is that the dominant position is created in power relations, and in that balance of resources and benefits those who suggest that they act from this position are more often than not given the benefit of the doubt. We are very often accomplices to this fact by showing that we have no intention of righting the balance of gender power relations.

The moment that hegemonic masculinity excluded any trace of homosexuality in its constitution, it made it socially acceptable to emotionally and physically abuse gay men and other MSM. As part of the power games, the hegemony is protected through aggression towards and even elimination of those who threaten it.

In the United States studies have produced highly important data for the healthy psychological and social development of young people with a different sexual orientation (*D'Augelli and Garnets, 1995*). They show the vulnerability of this population to aggression and mockery in society. According to D'Augelli and Garnets, gay and other men who have sex with men reported that 75% of them had been verbally harassed, 25% had been threatened with physical violence at least once, 22% had been persecuted, 5% had been spat at least once, and 17% had had their property damaged. Gay men are more frequently the target of verbal abuse than lesbians; more than half have made some adjustments to their daily lives to avoid harassment; 64% of young gay men and lesbians fear for their lives, and the majority of young men and women interviewed regard it as «normal» and «expected» to harass gays and lesbians; a fact that does not seem strange to them, nor are they interested in rejecting it.

The paradoxes of masculinity: Homoerotic desire

Hegemonic masculinity also occurs in sex between men. The subject of homosexuality and of homosexual behaviour in our culture brought up directly or as the subject of social debate is greeted with silence or rejection, particularly when the speaker is a man (*Guajardo, 2000; Bohan, 1996*). It is interesting that the need for HIV/AIDS prevention has broken that silence and has forced us to speak openly on the issue despite the stigma. See the discourse of Costa Rican men in the social imagery presented by Schifter (*1999*) and Schifter and Madrigal (*1998*); in the essays of Kormblit, Pecheny & Vujosevich (*1998*) in Buenos Aires, of Cáceres (*1996*) in Lima, Parker (*1999*) in Brazil, Guajardo (*2000*) in Chile, and Carballo-Diéguez (*1994*) on Puerto Rican men in New York.

Geographic contexts may vary but the social school attended by the men is essentially the same. The contradiction between identity and behaviour proposes a different analysis of the question of homosexualities. Castañeda (*1999*) tells us that «*the homosexual is not always homosexual; the heterosexual is.*» The heterosexual has been formed as such and is more consistently heterosexual. The author explains that homosexual persons become «conscious» of their sexual orientation as they go through life and probably define their sexual orientation based on their heterosexuality. However, the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality have become less clear (*Broido, 2000; Madrigal, 1998*), resulting in *hybrid identities*, as Carrillo calls them (*1999*).

Much has been said about bisexuality as an innate characteristic suggesting that sexual orientation is not a biological given, but is shaped in the course of the individual's personal and social history. Though this might seem an attractive idea, it has generated a series of debates on the origin of sexuality. In addition, there has been a proliferation of simplistic explanations for homosexuality. Efforts have multiplied to identify uniquely homosexual hormonal or genetic traits. Some researchers have found that if a man is homosexual and has an identical twin brother, there is likelihood that he too will be homosexual. Indeed, Ardila (1998) says, «Fifteen years ago we were stressing the importance of learning factors, while at the end of the century we are putting the emphasis on genetic and hormonal factors.» The fact is that hormonal and even cerebral differences are not universal. When some researchers suggest that the size of certain brain parts is different in homosexual men, and that their size is similar to that of women, the suspicion arises that such an interpretation, rather than having anything to do with the essence of brain structures, is related to the social construction of heterosexual masculinity, which seems to imply that everything about men is big and efficient (Hammer and Caplan, 1994).

We cannot deny that the essentialist thesis of the biological origin of homosexuality is located next to power in the discourses of minorities. And within those discourses they expect the fragile acceptance and social recognition for which homophile movements have struggled since the beginning of the last century. The argument here is that gays should be accepted not because they are free to choose their sexual identity but because they have no choice other than to be so.

Furthermore we consistently see that ethnographic studies conducted on populations of men who have sex with men in Latin America describe the rhetoric of interviewees in the context of the confluence of sexual orientation and gender. Cáceres (1999) tells us about the people of Lima, González and Liguori (1998) about Mexico, Schifter (1998) about Costa Rica, De Moya (1998) about the Dominican Republic, Parker (1997) about Brazil, and Ramírez (1996) about Puerto Rico. In all we see the discourses of men on homosexuality within the context of effeminateness and sexual passivity. Whether we call them *cacheros*, *bugarrones*, *fletes*, *bugas*..., the individuals described as such are men who have sex with men but who keep their allegiance to hegemonic masculinity by limiting themselves to active penetration and domination.

The literature on homosexuality in some developing countries describes in detail the gender-based polarization that we observe in sexual behaviour between men (Harding, 1998) even in the context of the sex industry (Perlongher, 1999). Murray (1995) provides a detailed description of sexual conduct between Latin American men as founded on traditional sexual roles where the «man» penetrates and the

«woman» is penetrated. The same thesis has been advanced by Carrier (1971; 1985) and Díaz (1997) regarding the impact of homophobia on the development of identities. Latin American literature has also examined sexual roles, social class, and homosexuality, as seen in the works of Bejel (2001), Parker (1999), Navarro and Stimpson (1999), and Parker and Gagnon (1995). Thus, the essence of urban and Anglo-Saxon homosexuality is reproduced in the imagery of the globalized ghetto, while at the core of our society we observe and describe other sexual cultures that govern the lives of other men who have sex with men (Fernández-Alemay & Sciolla, 1999; Murray, 1998; Schifter, 1997; Schifter & Madrigal, 1996).

It looks as if the conflict between essence and constructed identity will keep us occupied for quite some time to come because the force of hegemonic masculinity socially encumbers us and prevents us from looking at sexuality from the subjective point of view of the interlocutor. And for that reason the secret is an open secret, like the rumours about Doña Herlinda's son in Jorge Humberto Hermosillo's classic film. The social participation model, the desire to belong and to be the same as the rest of society, has led the movement to put aside the struggle against compulsive heterosexuality and institutionalised homophobia in order to lobby for pro-equity laws to protect the rights of homosexual persons to equal economic participation through marriage or domestic relationships, legal adoption, and in some countries, access to military institutions.

Vulnerability of gender transgression

Within this constellation of sexual identities we come across people who resist the biological script that fate imposed upon them. For example, some men who are born with male biological structures construct themselves as women and elect to face society as gender transgressors. Transgender is the umbrella concept used to describe any person who defies traditional sexual roles. The concept also applies to the full range of gender expressions seen in various fashion expressions as well as in drag queens, androgyns, transvestites, transformists, intersexuals, and transsexuals (Bocking, Robinson & Rosser, 1998).

In part reaffirming the heterosexual norm and in part recreating identities, transsexual men play with the rules of gender in such a way that it becomes a strange source of vulnerability for them (Rodríguez Madera and Toro-Alfonso, 2002).

There is ample evidence of the particular vulnerability to HIV infection of the transgendered and transsexual male population. This vulnerability is more evident

in populations of men who have sex with men in Latin America or in immigrant populations in the United States (*Bocking, et al, 1998; Parker, 1999; Schifter, 1999; Sykes, 1999; Toro-Alfonso, 1995*). Ethnic background and gender combine in such a way as to place men who have sex with men at greater risk of HIV infection (*Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne and Marin, 2001*).



Lorena, a member of the Transvestite Christian Community of the Lady of the Door, in Lima, Peru.
By Annie Bungeroth/GAZE.

Vulnerability on the social margins

Relegation to the social margins generates vulnerability. The exclusion and marginalization by society of men who have sex with men paves the way towards disease and need. Recent research has shown that, more than individual fragility, what generates vulnerability is the perception of social isolation, lack of social support, and fragility or non-existence of political organization and social

empowerment. «*Without a public sphere the private sphere loses value.*» (Chilean AIDS Prevention Corporation, 1997, p. 42).

Never before in an epidemic has the need been so urgent to rescue vulnerable populations from the social margins so that they can take control of their health and lives. Community-based organization and social empowerment are a crucial strategy for addressing the issue of public health in the face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Altman, 1994; Bianco, 1999; Kalichman, Somali and Sikkema, 2001; Vangorder, 1995). The United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS has recognized that «*HIV infection rates among MSM have diminished mainly as a result of the activities of gay organizations*» (UNAIDS, 2000, p. 6), thus underscoring the advantages of being organized for tackling the epidemic (UNAIDS, 2001).

Therefore, the challenge of prevention lies in strengthening support networks and structures for men who have sex with men. Social exclusion and criminalization of homoerotic desire and behaviour only bring harmful consequences. On the other hand, inclusion of diversity and social recognition are both characteristics of the best public health interventions (Ugarte, 1999).

On the fringes of society sex becomes a commodity. The need to survive turns the intimate relationship into a commercial transaction. Such interactions may be money or particular favours (Aráuz, Ortells, Morales, Guevara & Shedlin, 1997). Furthermore, alcohol and drugs become party companions, partly to enliven sexual encounters and partly to deaden feelings of remorse and the pressures of the sex industry. It is possible that alcohol and drugs may be necessary to enter an altered state of consciousness and thus be able to handle the pressures of daily life and the sex trade (Schifter, 1997).

Police persecution as well as discrimination and harassment on the part of judicial institutions, combined with the dangers and risks of the commercial ghetto, are part of the fate of many men who have sex with men. Prison, the courtroom, and police repression are well known in these circles. In most Latin American countries there is no official criminal penalty for sexual intercourse between men; however, the reality is that the rules on sodomy are maintained in the social imagery. «*The absence of a legal penalty neither removes, nor has anything to do with the social penalty, which makes people terrified and neurotic, deforming them*» (Ugarte, 1999, p. 78).

From exclusion to full citizenship

It is impossible to develop health promotion and HIV risk reduction programs in a context of exclusion and violation of human rights. Clearly, in this framework sexual rights are human rights.

Exclusion, poverty, lack of access to health services, and lack of recognition of the diversity of identities (situations that can even occasionally lead to murder) violate the rights to full citizenship of gay men and other men who have sex with men (*Díaz, Ayala & Marín, 2000*). Violations of citizenship are constant and widespread in our countries and the harsh reality is that these situations barely affect the rest of the community. Even in countries where protection of sexual diversity is supposedly guaranteed by the Constitution, men who have sex with men recognize their own vulnerability and levels of risk for social aggression.

«When such rights are not respected, MSM have less control over their behaviour and thus are more vulnerable to HIV infection» (UNAIDS, 2001, p.5)

In many cases emigration represents a way out, not only from profound poverty, but also in the quest for the fantasy of a social environment of supposedly greater tolerance and permissiveness (*Carballo-Diéguez, 1998*). Unquestionably «*the quasi-criminal and certainly marginal image of men who have sex with men should be corrected for the sake of the dignity of persons whom society recognizes as valid in their chosen professional, working, and creative fields*» (*Ugarte, 1999, p. 90*). Full citizen participation and freedom of choice are essential elements of any successful HIV/AIDS prevention effort.

C onclusion: from vulnerability to strength

Only when consideration is given to the structural vulnerability endured by gay men and other men who have sex with men will we be able to move ahead with the implementation of appropriate interventions to halt the HIV epidemic once and for all. Public health interventions should be aimed not only at tackling individual vulnerability, but also at dealing with the challenge of strengthening the organizations that represent these communities, in order to guarantee access to health services and observance of their human rights.

Even on the sidelines and in their vulnerability the homosexual population has a history of collective struggle that dates back to the beginnings of the epidemic. Through personal and organizational experience, gay communities know what it means to fight AIDS. In many countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, nongovernmental organizations created by and for the gay and lesbian population have implemented prevention and care initiatives for people living with HIV for more than 20 years (*Lumsden, 1991; Parker & Terto, 1998; Daniel & Parker, 1993; Ministry of Health of Brazil, 2000*). In Latin America the first anti-AIDS mobilizations involved nongovernmental organizations set up by homosexual and bisexual groups. This experience should be recognized and provided ongoing support, as it could even serve as an example for, and help contribute to the efforts of, other socially marginalised and excluded segments.

«We need better interventions for prevention among men who have sex with men, including those who do not identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. A key strategy is to strengthen emerging gay communities, because they are the ones who can do the best job of prevention education. At the same time, we need to challenge the discrimination that makes people vulnerable.» (Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, at the opening of the Pan-American Conference on AIDS, Lima, Peru, December 1997)

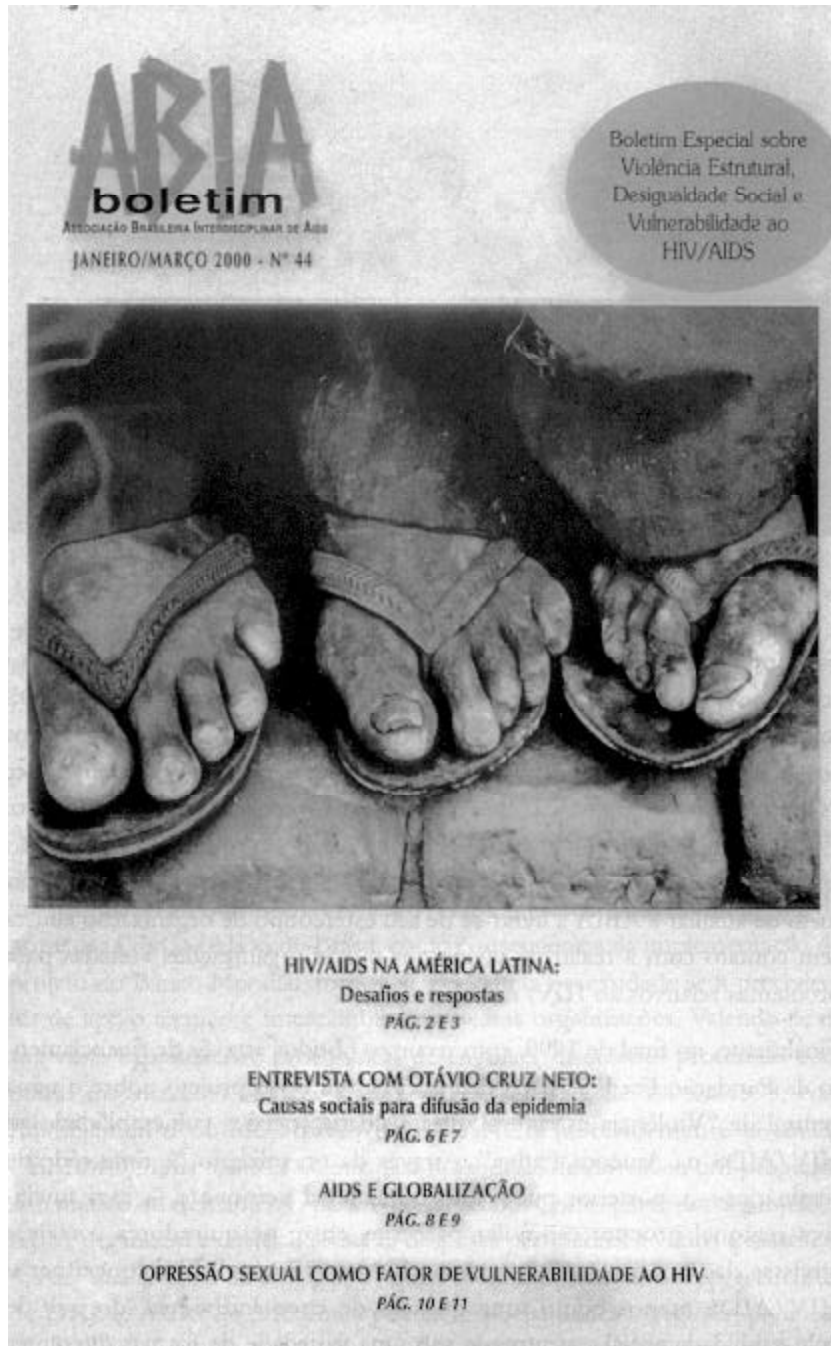
Every person has the right to lead a full life, and diversity of sexual orientation and identity should not be an obstacle to happiness. It is imperative to curb police interventions and the permissiveness and complacency that enable the majority to harm and marginalize MSM. Governments and their institutions provide a poor service to the community when they fail to recognize their duty. It is important to acknowledge that *«men who have sex with men face social, cultural, and occasionally, legal and economic discrimination because of their sexual behaviour. HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and support programs should be accompanied with activities to promote equality and non-discrimination» (UNAIDS, 1999, p. 9).*

Strengthening public health means ensuring that vulnerable populations have access to decent jobs, preventive health services, and freedom to express their sexuality. The recommendations submitted to UNAIDS (1999) at the Regional Consultation on HIV/AIDS Prevention, Care, and Support Programs in Latin America and the Caribbean for Men who Have Sex with Men remain valid.

The reality of MSM in Latin America and the Caribbean is a slap in the face for us. The pillars of vulnerability to HIV infection are set in exclusion and stigma. It is essential for governments and civil society to concoct development and solidarity plans aimed at providing assistance to one of the most vulnerable sectors of our population.

It is crucial to develop the legal conditions necessary to strengthen the exercise of full citizenship for gay men and other MSM. Health professionals need to be educated in order to make them sensitive to the reality and particular needs of this sector. Community-based organizations should receive sufficient assistance to enable ongoing implementation of programs by and for the MSM community. Strengthening community organizations and social support networks is an important and unavoidable public health challenge.

«When HIV programmes aimed at MSM are operating, it is vital that they should be maintained. There have been cases, including in developed countries, where programmes had their funds reduced, or even stopped, after the project was declared to have been «successful», or when it was thought that the risk to men engaging in same-sex behaviour had declined. (UNAIDS, 2001, p.7)



Sexual oppression as a vulnerability factor for HIV infection was recently addressed in symposia and publications, as this cover page of the ABIA bulletin shows (January-March 2000). Archives of ABIA.

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