

What's in a name

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In response to an NFI posting (September 2002) which appeared in *Igbt-India*, a critique was made in regard to the statement: "MSM sexual health projects" that was used. The respondent felt that the use of the acronym MSM in this context led to a sense of MSM being an identity term, when it is not.

There **is** a growing use of the term MSM as an identity label across South Asia, particularly where self-help sexual health projects have emerged.

In a highly gendered sexual environment, male-to-male sex is usually perceived as one of gendered roles acted out by *kothis/hijras* as the penetrated and feminised partner, and where the penetrating partner (the *panthi/giriya*) sees himself as a normative man. Thus the *panthi* perceives himself as having sex, not with another man, but with a "not-man", and his sense of masculinity is maintained

In local and regional languages, positive terms that signify men desiring men, men loving men, men having sex with men, may not be available. While the term *gay* (and even *homosexual*) have been widely disseminated, their association with Western frameworks of sexuality and the English language may preclude their general use in meaningful ways. So for many men who have sex with men, based on desire and as a potential orientation, there does not appear to be a term readily available without taking on the feminised label of *kothi/zenana*. . MSM appears to be fitting the bill in this regard.

Thus the original critique may have some validity.

NFI is therefore asking you all as to what would be the most appropriate term we could use. We recognise that the term MSM is shorthand for a complex phenomena, and with our focus on low-income, socially excluded and stigmatized males who have sex with males, of whom the majority identify as *kothis/zenanas*, MSM may not be the appropriate phrase for NFI to use. What do you suggest? Write to shiv@nfi.net with your suggestions.

Here are the points to think about.

* While we as a sexual health network focus on the most vulnerable MSM, those who are economically disadvantaged, those who are gendered, and those who are stigmatised and socially excluded, i.e *kothi-identified* MSM and their partners, during the recent TOT programme in Lucknow we discussed broadening this to include other frameworks of MSM behaviours, whether such males have a self-sexual identity label or not. Perhaps we should have been calling our partner projects 'kothi sexual health projects', but this ignores the other dynamics of male-to-male sex we work with?

* MSM – males who have sex with males, or men who have sex with men (your choice) – is a behavioural term, and our sexual health work needs to look at behaviour as much as the range of identity labels that some males choose to give themselves. This includes the *kothi/zenana* labels, *panthis/giriyas* (many of whom identify with the term *man* rather than with a sexual orientation/identity), *dublis/doparathas/double-deckers/AC-DC*, etc.

* In a sense we are developing sexual health services that address male-to-male sexual behaviours.

* A further comment made by the respondent is that we should talk of “sexual health projects targeted at MSM”.

I am not sure, but I find the word ‘targeted’ problematic based on the nature of how we as individual projects work and speak of empowerment and enabling environments.

Maybe we should say:

Working with MSM collectivities, or

Working with MSM sexualities, or

Working with MSM, or

Working with male-to-male sexualities (MMS)

What do you think?

Points of view

- MSM is not an exclusive category or “target group”.
- However, it does include those with specific sexual identities, such as gay-identified men, and those with gendered identities, such as self-identified kothis.
- MSM is not a “target population” unless you wish to speak of the category MEN as a population group.
- MSM does not break into “heterosexuals” or “homosexuals,” or even “bisexuals”.
- But how do we define the term MAN?
- The word MEN is problematic in different cultural frameworks because of its association with other dynamics than biological age, such as marriage, religious rituals, duty.
- Not all MSM are at risk of STI/HIV infection in terms of their male-to-male sexual practices. This would depend on specific practices.
- We should be talking about male-to-male anal sex as a high-risk behaviour.
- We should also be talking of male-to-female anal sex as well.
- Male-to- male sexual behaviours may well be a normative sexual practice, yet hidden and invisible.
- The use of orientation labels for HIV transmission is also problematic, i.e. heterosexual or homosexual transmission.
- Male-to-male sexual behaviours as a term makes more sense than men who have sex with men.
- In south Asia (as probably elsewhere in the world) gendered identities play a more significant role in male-to-male sex than the concepts of heterosexual or homosexual orientations.

- This means that the “manly” (penetrative) partner perceives himself as a MAN, while the penetrated partner is perceived (and often by himself also) as NOT-MAN.
- Thus the penetrating partner would perceive himself (and is perceived by the kothis whom he penetrates) as a “heterosexual”.
- Thus the experience of male-to-male sexual behaviours includes broad categories of males, including”
 - Street males
 - Males in all male institutions
 - Males across the spectrum of occupations and classes
 - Males who are deemed as “normative”
 - As well as those males with differing gendered identities and sexualities
 - Males who sell sex to other males
 - Males who identify as gay or homosexual
 - Males who are married