

SAATHII: Sensual suggestions for male-to-male masseurs

SAATHII (Solidarity and Action against the HIV Infection in India) is an NGO helping to build the capacity of individuals and organizations that work on HIV, AIDS and sexuality in India, through research, technical assistance, advocacy and networking. Its Calcutta office undertook a study in West Bengal State exploring notions of pleasure in male-to-male sex in India, asking the question: 'Can introducing 'elements of sensuousness' in the way male-to-male sex is perceived and experienced in India make it safer in terms of STI/HIV infections?'

The study used personal interviews with key informants in the male-to-male sex community, including massage parlour owners and masseurs (a lot of commercial male-to-male sex takes place in massage parlours). Study findings highlighted the following aspects of male-to-male sex in India:

- the language of male-to-male sex is largely aggressive, with sex often associated with violence and power dynamics ("If one can make another person lie below him in bed, then he has more power..." said one informant in the study.)
- oral and anal penetration are common
- the number of sexual partners is seen as an indicator of status
- among many 'feminized' men, aggression, power and force or rape are not seen as major issues when it comes to gaining sexual satisfaction
- aggression increases the chance of unsafe sex
- according to one respondent: "When one meets a good (looking) guy in the train or bus, they try to have sex by whatever means (and) wherever possible, so they can hardly think of condoms then."

Based on the findings of the study, SAATHII then asked 'What can be done to make sex safer for men who have sex with men without reducing its pleasure quotient?' A change in existing laws against same sex sexual behaviour, obscenity and commercial sex were named as key changes, but: "The task, of making society accept sex as a means of getting pleasure, and that non-penetrative (sex) is also pleasurable, cannot be achieved overnight; so we need to find out more immediate and practical approaches which can be implemented easily."

Some of the suggested actions include encouraging sex education in schools which expands the meaning of 'sex' to include non-penetrative acts, and training masseurs and the owners of massage parlours to promote safer and more pleasurable sex. For example, the study authors suggest that:

- each massage parlour can have a trainer skilled in training masseurs to give pleasurable sexual services without compromising their or their clients' health and well-being;

- training can be given during duet sessions or through discussion with the masseurs or by experienced masseurs;
- regular feedback should be sought from clients to assess the masseurs' performance and the feedback should be shared with the masseur so that he can get additional training if needed; and
- individuals can be trained in the art of lovemaking, using films, flip charts or books (with cartoons and photos of models enacting sexual poses).

SAATHII has now started a Sensuousness Action Research Project (SARP) based on the findings of the study. Initially, it will test the efficacy of behaviour change communication (BCC) materials which incorporate elements of sensuousness in making male-to-male sex safer as well as pleasurable. The BCC materials will include a short film, small booklet and training workshop module. The film is a short feature set in a massage parlour, where the massage parlour owner deals with a client wanting a sexual massage, and a masseur deals with the client and negotiates safer sex. The film is being made using sensuous still photos with a voice-over narrative.

Other actions are also planned by SAATHII, and the study has illuminated a wide range of priorities which could go a long way towards increasing safer sex in male-to-male sexual encounters by working within existing notions of sensuality and pleasure, while also helping to change some of the norms, beliefs and legal and social issues that prevent safer sex and well-being.

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