MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN:
STIGMA/DISCRIMINATION, AND RISK OF HIV/AIDS IN LAOS

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ABSTRACT
In Lao society, the notion of binary gender is the norm and sexual relations between men is socially condemned and prohibited by law. In this context, men-having-sex-with-men (MSM) is unacceptable by society at large. This qualitative research was conducted with the aim to understand the lives of MSM in Vientiane, Laos. Conceiving gender as a socially constructed phenomenon, this study interprets the social and sexual lives of MSMs as it relates to their having a marginalized status. Eleven MSMs were included in this study. In-depth interviews, participant and non-participant observation, informal discussions with MSMs, and key informant interviews with local authorities and NGO workers were employed for data collection.

Results of this study revealed four distinct MSM identities: gay men, Kathoey, and non-gay men and women. Gender biases were found influencing MSMs in every sphere of daily life. MSMs who had long hair and wore dresses like women were more likely to face stigma and discrimination in public, workplace, and private life. Being MSM constrained them from receiving higher education and finding respectable jobs and required identity conflict management. MSMs look for love and long-term relationships, but yet ironically not from Laos men due to strong stigma on MSMs and the fact that MSMs were sexually and economically taken advantage of. MSMs have their coping practices, namely temporary migration to Thailand for freer expressions of their identities and desires. Strong stigma and discrimination result in unequal power relations and unsafe sex practices causing MSMs risks of receiving violence, HIV/AIDS, and STIs. The findings suggest recognition of MSMs in society, advocacy of MSM health and rights from policy-making, NGOs and community levels.

KEY WORDS: MEN HAVING SEX WITH MEN/ STIGMA/ DISCRIMINATION/ GENDER CONSTRUCTION/ LAOS

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