EXPLORING SEXUALITY OF OLDER PEOPLE IN AN URBAN AREA OF THAI BINH PROVINCE, CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality plays a crucial role in improving people’s quality of life and sense of well-being regardless of their age. The myths that older people are uninterested in sex or sexually inactive are popular and reinforced in daily life, leading older people to refrain from meeting their sexual needs and becoming vulnerable to sexual health problems. This research aims to explain sexuality and existing social and sexual discourses of older people and to describe how they cope with sexual health problems. A postmodern feminist perspective was employed in the study. Community mapping, key-informant interviews, participant and non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with 11 older people aged between 54 and 76 were conducted over 4 months of ethnographic research in a community in an urban area of Thai Binh province, Vietnam.

The findings showed that dramatic changes in the social and cultural context in the “Doi moi” renovation period in 1986 had a profound impact on older people’s lives, leading to dramatic influence on their sexual lives. However, the sexuality of older people is still influenced by dominant sexual discourses implying that sex is limited to people with youth, health, and attractive bodies, representing a marked contrast to decayed, unhealthy, and old bodies. These perceptions lead older people to struggle between the moral and respectable images of being sexually inactive and the immoral people and unrespectable images of being sexually active. Gender discourses also play a role in influencing older people’s sexual lives. Some of the sexually active older male respondents faced depression because of their concerns about sexual dysfunction and not being able to fulfill masculinity. Some older women reported a difficult choice between painful sex and fulfilling their roles as wives while others enjoyed their sexual lives. A diversity of sexual pleasures, expressions and partners in older people was also found in the study. Reluctance to use condoms due to total trust in the clean bodies of their partners among older men may put them at risk of contracting STIs and HIV/AIDS through extra-marital sex. The research has implications for policy makers, planners and implementers in the provision of culturally sensitive and context-specific sexual health care services to enhance the quality of sexual life for older people.

KEY WORDS: OLDER PEOPLE/SEXUAL DISCOURSE/SEXUALITY/SEXUAL HEALTH/VIETNAM

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