



■ Research is the key to change.

Suriname



Love, Sex, Marriage *and* HIV

RESEARCH BRIEF

This research is part of a multi-country study titled Building Responsive Policy: Gender, Sexual Culture and HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean. This International Development Research Centre (IDRC Canada)-funded research undertaken in Barbados, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago was executed by the UN Women Caribbean Office with partners - the University of the West Indies' (UWIHARP), Cave Hill, Barbados; the Stichting Ultimate Purpose, Suriname; the UWI Institute for Gender & Development Studies (IGDS) St Augustine Unit, Trinidad and Tobago; as well as UNICEF.

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*The researchers explained the sources of information for the study: "We recruited 18 couples for qualitative interviews, 6 for each religion crossing with 6 for each age group. We identified couples with support of religious leaders and through our own networks. We also interviewed religious leaders and people active in the parish (14). In order to protect the respondents from our small sample (36), and to back up the qualitative findings with some quantitative substance, we expanded our research with additional street interviews (65) and a company scan (334). The total research population for quantitative findings was 435 persons, 273 men and 152 women."*¹

They noted that cross-religious marriage was accepted and occurred within the small sample of interviewees, but that there were no cross-ethnic marriages in the sample. Because homosexuals cannot get married in Suriname, the study of married couples was necessarily just about heterosexuals.

Research On... Caribbean Sexual and Gender Cultures

Professor Kamala Kempadoo

Research on sex, sexuality, sexual practice and sexual culture needs to be done in ways that are positive and ethical. We need to be mindful about the kinds of questions we ask, the methods we use to gather information, how we analyze data, and the kind of interpretations and recommendations we make regarding wider interventions, actions and policies. If done carefully, we could produce research results that would support positive social change.

It is also vital to carefully examine and question how law, religion, the media, gender relations, ethnicity, and class and any other significant factors such as ability, create a particular culture or cultures with their own set of understandings, norms and values, and which produce particular sexual knowledge, actions and identities.

UN WOMEN and a number of researchers have focused on sexual culture in order to produce informed recommendations for HIV&AIDS prevention policies and programmes that close the gap between knowledge about sex, and sexual behaviour.

Gender (the way women and men relate in society) and patriarchy (relations of power where males are dominant) remain critical to our study of sexuality. As organizations such as UN WOMEN have made abundantly clear, the fact that men hold economic, political, social and often the physical power over other genders – and can, and very often do, dictate or enforce the terms of social and sexual engagement – puts many other groups at great risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections.

Any attempt to effectively intervene in the HIV & AIDS epidemics must then take a look at what sex means in peoples' everyday lives and what makes sexual acts and expressions desirable and pleasurable. We could then also ask and perhaps answer what it is in the sexual culture that enables people – sometimes very wise, knowledgeable or responsible people – to put themselves and others in danger.

**Professor Kempadoo has been studying sexuality
and sexual culture since the early 1990s**

SUMMARY

Couples wedded within the faith of their churches, mosques or temples are broadly considered to be relatively safe from HIV infection, which affects some 1% of Suriname's half-million population.

This perception is based, on the one hand, on ideals of marriage as a space where sex is shared only between the faithful partners and, on the other hand, on the idea that most HIV sufferers fall within identified 'at risk' groups including men who have sex with men (MSM)s, commercial sex workers, youth and migrants.

But does the perception stand up to testing? Researchers interviewed husbands and wives of different ages, from Suriname's dominant religious groups: Christian, 41%; Hindu, 20%; and Muslim, 14%. They found that while religious leaders consistently taught the virtues of virginity before marriage, and faithfulness within it, their followers struggled to mesh belief with the norms and values of the wider, secular society.

If marriage were to be a safe space, in relation to HIV risk, people would have to enter it as virgins; and remain monogamous thereafter. If they ceased to be monogamous, they would have to always use condoms. This would mean that they were consistently operating within an atmosphere of trust and accountability.

The study casts doubt that most people behave in this way.

Interviewees were asked about their sexual knowledge and experience before and after marriage, as well as attitudes to sexual pleasure and practices related to extra-marital relationships; within the context of religious and other teachings.

Their responses revealed many complexities. For instance, many of the interviewees were not taught anything about the importance of sexual pleasure

or about the accompanying emotions, even though most of the religious leaders who were interviewed recognized the importance of mutual sexual pleasure for married couples.

Differences were also recognized between the attitudes and experiences of men and women, and between groups of men and groups of women.

The researchers underlined that if both men and women (husbands and wives) were to enjoy sex within marriage, they would need to appreciate apparent differences in sexual drive and sexual tastes.

About one-third of the persons interviewed in the study, mostly the men, admitted to extra-marital sex. About half of those said

that they have unprotected sex with both their spouses and their extramarital partners.

“...Reality,” said the researchers, “... shows married men and women engaging in extra-marital sexual activities and relationships. This might include having sex with young people (the sugar daddy), with people married to other people, having sex with people of the same sex, and having sex with commercial sex workers.”² Youth, men who have sex with men (MSMs) and commercial sex workers (CSWs) are considered to be three most at-risk populations (MARPS).

The researchers emphasized that as long as religious leaders turned a blind eye to (mainly male) extra-marital sex, while continuing to promote the ideal of faithfulness, it would be difficult to discuss protection; which contributes to putting married people, especially women, at risk.

1983 Suriname registers first HIV case

2002 National ARV treatment system initiated

2008 5,669 HIV cases (2,986 women; 2,683 men) This is estimated to be 40-50% of the actual number infected

2008 683 new cases (271 men; 412 women) This number showed annual increase until 2007 when it started trending down

1998 5 HIV-positive children under 5 years

2005 29 HIV-positive children under 5 years

2004 152 AIDS-related deaths

2008 113 AIDS-related deaths (Statistics from HIV/STI Surveillance Report, 2004-2008, Ministry of Health, 2010)

It was acknowledged that current prevalence figures, based mainly on information collected from persons who register for treatment or testing, was inadequate, because the surveillance system is essentially blind to persons who do not come forward for testing.

BACKGROUND

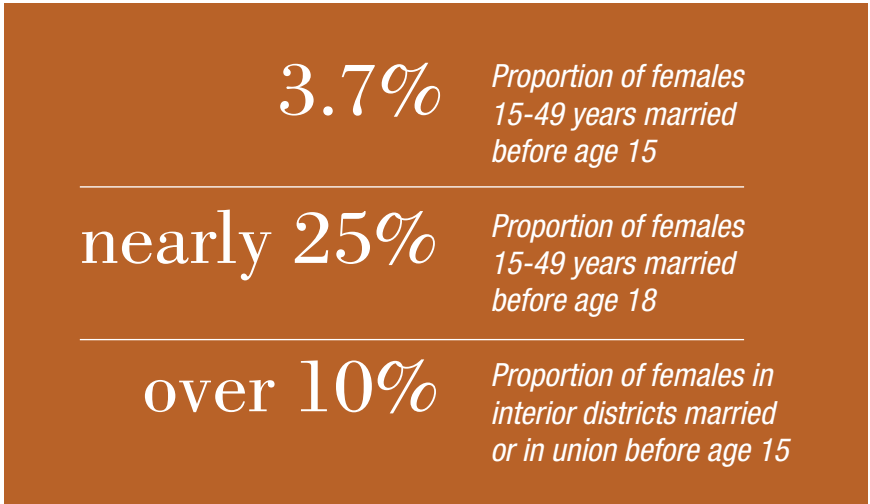
Poverty is a major problem in Suriname, with multiple surveys indicating levels up to 74%. The most vulnerable were identified as female headed households, youth up to 24 years, the population of the interior and senior citizens. While unemployment was generally high, women were nearly twice as likely as men to be classified as ‘not economically active’, with the main reason being that they were undertaking family duties. Wages were generally inadequate, especially among women.

Suriname also has significant levels of mobility and migration, high levels of patronage, inequality rooted in race, class and gender, as well as parallel systems of marriage and concubinaat. High levels of mobility can increase the likelihood of engagement with commercial sex workers; inequity and patronage may lead to unbalanced relationships; while high levels of unemployment and therefore insufficient income can contribute to sex in return for gifts. These and other factors help to drive the HIV epidemic.

THE LAW: SEX, GENDER AND MARRIAGE

Suriname’s Moral Act, significantly revised in 2009, protects children up to 12 years, and unmarried youth under 16 years, from ‘sexual penetration of the body’. However, minors are considered to become legal adults upon marriage.

The Marriage Act, which replaced marriage arrangements under the Suriname Civil Code and the Asian Marriage Act, sets the minimum age for marriage at 15 years for girls and 17 years for boys; though parental consent is required until the age of 21 years.



Proportion of females in interior districts married or in union before age 18

over 50%

Females 15 – 19 with a husband or partner 10 years older or more

20%

(MICS research 2006, 2009 (p35) ³)

While legal and religious marriage is between a man and a woman, Surinamese law does not criminalize same sex relations. Concubinaat or living together is also acknowledged, whether partners are from the same or the opposite sex.

Rape, within and outside of marriage is punishable, whether the aggressor is male or female. Suriname also has laws against sexual harassment and domestic violence.

Definitions

- **Sex:** intercourse between the sexes
- **Sexuality:** sexual appeal, interest or involvement
- **Sexual Culture:** the way in which sexual relations are conducted and viewed within a society
- **Homosexual:** someone whose sexual partner(s) are of the same sex
- **Heterosexual:** someone whose sexual partner(s) are of the opposite sex
- **Concubinaat:** living as common-law man and wife
- **Monogamy:** sticking to just one partner
- **Polygamy:** a man having the possibility of marrying more than one woman

SEX, SEXUALITY & MARRIAGE: Views of Religious Leaders

The researchers interviewed religious leaders from the leading faith groups. They noted a similar focus on the importance of marriage and keeping sex within marriage, but variations on many subsidiary issues, both between and within religious communities.

Concubinaat: On the subject of concubinaat, for instance, all of the main religions disallowed it. But within all the faiths, there were leaders who admitted that the divide was not solid.

One pandit, for instance, stated that while marriage was preferred, “we acknowledge concubinaat if man and woman vow to be faithful to each other for life.”⁴

Marriage: A pastor from the Moravian Church (EBC) said: “We see marriage as born from the need of men, approved by God, and highly recommended by the Church.”

All religious leaders agreed that the wife’s position in the marriage was not a subordinate one, but also stated that the husband was the head of the family.⁵

Matchmaking: Pandits and imams had an important role in helping parents to find suitable partners for their sons and daughters – and in so doing, took into account parental concerns about level of education, complexion of skin and wealth, without judging these criteria. Christian leaders had less of a role in this area.

Divorce: Most leaders allowed divorce but it was not generally approved.

Age and Sex: A pandit of a major Hindu temple, explained that the first phase of life – which lasts until age 25 for males and 16 for females – should be dedicated to learning. He said that the age differential was because girls were ready for sex earlier than boys. Some persons who protested against raising the minimum age for marriage had similarly argued that girls, once they were ‘ripe’, could not control their hormones and had to be married off ‘before they could assault all males around them with their sex drive’.

Another pandit, stating that sex was for procreation within marriage, argued that men and women over 50 years old, should refrain from sex and strive instead for spiritual growth.

Virginity Before Marriage: This was universally approved as it provided a framework for sexuality and ensured that children could be recognized as legitimate.

None of the religions distinguished between men and women when they demanded that persons remain sexually pure until they entered into a union. However the possibility of pregnancy made this a more critical issue for women. A pandit explained that the

shame of pregnancy before marriage could only be saved if the couple got married within the first three months.

Sex within Marriage: There seemed to be broad agreement that husbands and wives should both enjoy sex, within marriage; but religious leaders varied in their willingness to discuss the topic.

Imams stated that a man was obligated to satisfy his wife sexually if he had no reason to refuse her, as well as the other way around. They argued that sex, which should give mutual pleasure, peace of mind and children, also lowered the risk of men and women having forbidden encounters outside of the marriage.

Christian leaders noted that the Bible explicitly addresses a range of love, including sensual love, using language that many preachers might be uncomfortable sharing with their communities.

Adultery: Adultery is universally forbidden within religious communities. Pandits spoke of the dangers of loose living and lust, especially for men, and of the need to keep the marriage bed pure. One Imam emphasized that adultery increased the danger of contracting HIV, especially in these days.

Christian leaders stated that a woman's body belongs to her husband and the man's body belongs to his wife and they should not deprive one another.

Given the importance of reproduction, some religious leaders identified inability on the part of wife or husband

as the only basis for condoning adultery. However, one Muslim leader contended that a man who could not procreate should instead divorce his wife.

Polygamy: Islam does not object to polygamy, indeed accepting that a man may have up to five wives to satisfy his need for sex and prevent unlawful encounters. However, the imams stated that the local Muslim community did not apply this practice, since polygamy is unlawful in Suriname and Muslims respect and follow the law of the land. One respondent did refer to a Muslim organization that secretly practices polygamy – which could affect the rights of second wives and their children to various benefits and services.

Heterosexuality/Homosexuality: Heterosexuality was the norm in all three religions.

Muslim leaders warned against same-sex relations, noting that they were forbidden as a horror; but added that they do not exclude homosexuals, rather leaving them to God.

Hindu leaders noted that same-sex relations were not mentioned in the Vedas. They did not approve of such relationships, because two men or two women cannot procreate. However they accepted them and acknowledged that there might be circumstances under which such relationships could be blessed.

Christian leaders quoted the Bible as a basis for finding same-sex relations unnatural. However actual responses to this increasingly accepted practice appeared to depend on how the society

treats it. If people were fighting it, religious leaders supported them. If they were happy, the religious leaders looked the other way.

Discussing Sexuality: Recent years have seen some changes with respect to discussing sexuality in the Mosque, though the message of maintaining virginity is still the law of the Islam – as it is the message proclaimed by the Hindu Temple and Christian church. Members have discussed topics such as homosexuality, and even HIV and AIDS.

In the Hindu temple, the leaders discuss issues of life and marriage, as do the elders in the family, and they continue to advise members to be faithful to their spouses.

However the extent to which issues are discussed, in mosque, temple or church, appeared to be determined, in part, by the age and background of the individual religious leaders.

Religion and Society: The researchers noted that religious leaders differentiate between rules of religion and rules of culture; for example: the Bible speaks about ‘celebration of marriage’ and ‘the sensual love’; it is preachers who do not know how to talk about sex from their cultural background. They also noted that though adultery and homosexuality are not acceptable in Islam, they are not punished because Islam respects the law of the land.

SEX, SEXUALITY & MARRIAGE: Views of Married Couples

The research was rooted in the way interviewees viewed and experienced sexuality – both prior to and within marriage. This related to parental and religious teachings; what was learned at school, from friends and within the wider society; as well as knowledge gained from husbands or wives.

The study challenged the common view that men and women naturally have different sexual needs and desires: men being aggressive and violent, with greater sexual appetites; while women are naturally caring, passive and emotional, with lesser sexual appetites. This was presented as an equation constructed by society and one that could be used to justify unequal sexual relationships.

Nonetheless it was noted that differences between men and women about how often they preferred to have sex could be a major challenge to monogamy.

Socialization: Surinamese continued to fall into the regional and international pattern where boys and girls are raised differently, with males given more freedom and generally expected to be socially and sexually active within a heterosexual frame, while female chastity is valued.

Throughout the three generations, [especially Hindustani] women complained about restrictions on their actions. Being forbidden to go anywhere unsupervised prevented girls from acquiring a level of independence. The preferential treatment of boys created a significant gender divide.

Sex Education: When it came to sex education at school, there was a significant difference between the experiences of the three generations of couples. Most first generation couples did not learn anything about sexuality. Only one respondent was told a ‘seed and egg’ story that he found confusing, and another said that boys at his Catholic School had a visit from a medical doctor who told them about procreation and sexually transmitted infections.

The second-generation couples did not learn anything about sexuality in primary school either, but learned about reproduction in biology class, during the second year of secondary school.

Third generation couples gained much more information. All these respondents said that they received clear biological information at primary school, usually in the 5th Grade. However this was still only information on anatomy and physiology; feelings were not discussed. Some schools invited organizations to deliver lectures on specific subjects such as family planning.

All of the couples, across generations, received information from friends and some also from families. One woman related that when she got the information

about sex it was too late because she was already pregnant.

Virginity Before Marriage: Views on sexuality were generally rooted in religious teachings, whether or not this was explicit. Interviewees married more than 20 years all recalled religious teaching forbidding sex before marriage. For couples married 11 – 20 years, none recalled actual religious teaching about sexuality, but they had still internalized the message that pre-marital sex was sinful.

One respondent stated: “The rules are not openly conveyed, but still they are there.”⁶

Couples of the young (married less than 10 years) generation still visited the temple and mosque regularly as children and learned to remain pure before marriage: “The message was that sex is something you only reserve for the one and only person you are going to spend the rest of your life with. You did not have the nerve to ask any questions.”⁷

This mantra of purity before marriage applied to temple, mosque and church-going youth.

Even for those who were not brought up to be explicitly religious this message was drilled in, especially for girls: “My mother kept repeating over and over again not to lose our virginity. But I think that that fear originates more in the Hindustani culture than in the religion. We Hindustani are very keen on virginity.”⁸

For men, however, the message of purity before marriage appeared to conflict with an expectation that men should take the lead and show sexual initiative.

Despite the teachings, fewer than half the respondents (male and female) were virgins when they married. Two men had premarital sex with their current wives. Others had various partners. Some men had paid for sex. One woman was abused as a child.

One man said that he had sex with his future wife before marriage to make sure that he was her first partner. A previous engagement had been cancelled, at his parents' instigation, when he had sex with the girl and found that she was already 'deflowered'.

Another man stated: "I waited to marry her after she finished school; she was 21 and I was 27. But we had sex after a year (of the relationship)." When asked how they decided on their course of action, he said: "I told her, 'If you really love me you have to prove it to me'. And so she did." He did not feel that he had pressured her.⁹

None of the male respondents felt guilty about not being virgins; while some of the women who were not virgins considered this their greatest sin before marriage.

Some women stated that they would try not to reproduce the traditional gender patterns with their own children.

Learning about Sex & Sexuality:

The views of the respondents were mainly shaped by what they had learned

from friends, parents, TV and, for some women, their husbands.

Very few respondents learned anything about sex at home, except that it was taboo for both male and female – with the greatest restrictions being on the females. This could extend to a lack of information on their own bodies.

One woman recalled that when she started getting breasts, her grandmother taught her not to play with boys anymore as they would all want to have sex with her. "But she did not explain what sex is...."¹⁰ I still asked an older friend lots of questions because I wanted to know how it feels to have sex and what the penis of the man looked like."

Some respondents had parents who taught them about love, respect, and being selective when it came to sexual behaviour, to the extent that one woman, in certain situations, still hears the voice of her father or mother saying: "Wait, and think again"!

Some respondents had received a mix of messages that seemed at cross-purposes. Maroon cultural teachings, for instance, included warnings about sexuality blended with references to sexual pleasure.

Some respondents felt hampered by their ignorance on matters of sexuality, both male ("I did not dare to approach a girl out of fear that things might go wrong. You just might make her pregnant on the first touch and then you would have ruined her.")¹¹ and female ("My husband taught me everything, I did not know anything. That's why for

years I used to be so shy, I couldn't talk openly about what I enjoyed when we had sex").¹²

First Sexual Experiences: Asked about their first sexual experiences, respondents divided along gender lines. Each man reported enjoying his first sexual encounter and most thought that their partners enjoyed it too. Most women did not like their first experience, and doubted whether their partners liked it. Age also played a part, with only some young women truly enjoying first intercourse. Most women mentioned kissing and touching as very enjoyable first experiences, while most men talked directly about intercourse.

Young couples reported seeking information: studying religious books, watching movies and searching on the internet.

Decisions About Marriage: In couples married more than 20 years, the partners all got to know each other without interventions from family or religion. In all couples, the men took the initiative, and all stated that they fell in love and married voluntarily. Some couples actually rebelled against their parents' wishes, including one man who converted to Islam to marry a Muslim woman, against his Christian parents' wishes.

The women in the sample made their choices from the options made available to them. The more closed their upbringing, the less chance they had to actually get to know any man better. In this small sample, Hindu and Muslim

girls of Hindustani descent had the strictest rules. Muslim girls of Javanese descent appeared to have more liberty.

Christian [Maroon] women of the middle generation (married 11 - 20 years) expressed some reluctance to be married, preferring visiting relations or concubinaat, and often choosing marriage only after converting to a Christian denomination that required it.

In Hinduism and Islam, not marrying was not an option. Even males experienced the pressure to marry. In the 1990s, 20 years was considered a good marriage age for boys and 18 years for girls in Hindustani families. With a worsened economic situation, this has moved up to 24 or 25 years for males and 21 or 22 years for females.

Many parents fulfilled the role of prison guard in extending social control to their children, and pushing for quick marriage once a choice was made. A young Muslim woman said: "We made a free choice to be together, but when it comes to marriage we were kind of forced to marry as soon as possible. My parents would stay away for two months to go on Hadj and to prevent things from going wrong (pre-marital sex) we had to get married prior to their departure. I was not really ready for it, in fact."¹³ Parents might object to potential marriage partners on various grounds, including age, colour, nationality, religion; based on what is normal in their culture community as well as the family's desired lifestyle. None of the couples interviewed were inter-racial. And marrying someone with

a different religion was tolerated but not encouraged.

Different religions (and streams within religions) showed nuanced opinions about cross-religious marriages. An Imam said: “It’s personal. People either object to the choice of their child or not.” Parents of East Indian youth, in particular, acknowledged concerns regarding incidences of suicide due to conflict with parents over love.¹⁴

Nonetheless, Hindu couples got clear messages from home that their partner should be a Hindustani and also Hindu – with the stream of Hinduism also an issue in some cases. Other criteria involved levels of education and employment, and family background.

Some respondents indicated that they made religion an important criterion for themselves because it was so important to their parents. A Muslim man “was always careful not to fall in love in school because my parents warned me: ‘You better not come home with another race or religion’. But it was not an iron law, my youngest brother married an Amerindian girl and that was not a real problem. With us Amahdya it is not mandatory to bring a Muslim, it’s a preference. But with the SMA (the very orthodox Surinaamse Moslim Associatie) you cannot make your own choice. If you bring home a Creole or Hindu you will be disinherited or thrown out of the house.”¹⁵

Expectations & Realities of Marriage: There was a difference between the younger and older generations when it came to expectations

of marriage. The young generation worried that they would have to make sacrifices that the previous generations did not perceive in that light. Thus younger men worried about losing their freedom while older men assumed that they would simply continue to have their freedom. Younger women worried about having to take up the burden of household tasks, while older ones never expected their husbands to participate in this area.

Several respondents divided household tasks, often with the woman working inside the home and the man outside it. For Muslim and Christian couples and one Hindu couple, males and females shared the task of looking after the children, but the women had the primary responsibility.

Couples across various groups also struggled to live up to expectations that marriage would offer more social status and economic improvement.

Extra-marital Sex: Respondents were clear that extra-marital sex was forbidden. A Muslim women who said she was not oppressed, and indeed had “a free life” was nonetheless clear that her husband would not forgive her if she were to have an extra marital relationship.

A Hindu woman said that she never thought about having an extra-marital relationship. She said that she got everything from her husband and it wouldn’t be fair to him.

Some women said that they would forgive their spouses if they were

unfaithful, while other women would break off the relationships. On the other hand, not one male interviewee said that he would forgive his wife if she was unfaithful.

A woman observed that nowadays, both young and older Hindustani men openly had extra-marital relationships as soon as they could afford it financially. "I understand that it happened in the old days as well, but you did not see it."¹⁶

Many of the men interviewed raised the issue of temptation. One noted: "Men are easily attracted to a woman's beauty ...men are easily seduced."¹⁷ Another said he had "always tried to stay away from temptation."¹⁸

Still others admitted to relationships outside of their marriages. One had a scare when there was a chance of a woman being pregnant. "That relationship stopped when I converted – I was 40 – seriously to the Islam. Before that time I was a Muslim, but I did not live according to the religious rules."¹⁹

Another Muslim man had a series of short relationships, despite promising his wife to be faithful and despite being aware that his religion disapproved. "Every time I do it, I feel guilty, but it is an addiction...These relationships are short as the women become materialistic or start to demand more."²⁰ They ... want me to leave my wife and choose for them. For me it is only sexual." He identified the root of the problem as the point where their first child was born, and his wife began to stay at home while he went out alone.

A [Hindu] woman and her child suffered the consequences of her husband being unfaithful: "I was pregnant of my third child when he came home with love-bites. It really hurt me. His sister talked to him, 'Haven't you heard of HIV?' ... When I had my third child there was a problem: her eyes could not open. Then the nurse asked me if my husband was fooling around. My child had a venereal disease, that made her eyes puss. They send him a note to come to the clinic but he never went."²¹

Beyond the married respondents, the researchers also identified 148 persons in extra-marital relationships from street interviews and a closed sample of persons working in a large company.

Sexual Relations and Pleasure:

Male and female respondents had different feelings about their sex lives. Among the men, there were also differences between those who had always attempted to be faithful and those who sought sexual diversity before and/or during their marriages.

Said one man who was still enjoying sexual pleasure with his wife after over 40 years of marriage: "You don't immediately get it right.... It is something you have to learn. You have to get to know your partner, her sensitivities... And she has to learn what you like and then you bring it together... It can only feel good when two people are feeling good."²²

By comparison, a man married for over 40 years but no longer enjoying sexual pleasure with his wife, stated: "When

I was young...everything was sex. Now I don't need it anymore... Perhaps, if I would see some young blood, yes! But now I can't do that anymore because now I'm truly religious.”²³

Many of the female interviewees experienced sex differently from men. Few took the initiative, and some would be satisfied to do without sex, but for the fear that refusing would lead their partners into adultery.

One woman of the middle generation said that she loved her husband and if he wanted sex she gave it to him: “Sex is like a cake, everybody say it's sweet, but I am just not fond of it.”²⁴

Another woman noted: “As a Hindustani girl, you are raised to be demure. ... Now I realize also that within Hinduism, sexuality is very important. For example the Kama Sutra, so I want to explore more about sexuality in Hinduism.”²⁵

Most of the older women said that they had learned to like sex along the way, having struggled with ignorance and the idea that decent women did not like sex.

Some men came to realize that their women were not always very interested in sexual approaches. Some middle generation and younger men indicated that they would like to have sex more often than their spouses.

Openness and trust between partners, leading to shared learning, was more evident in the younger generation than in the two older ones: “You get more and more comfortable with each other” one woman said. “A friend brought a book

about different positions and we studied it together, my husband also thought it was so intriguing. We talk about what we like and he can send me information from the internet, or sex films and ask me, ‘Do you want to try this?’”²⁶

For most respondents, male and female, marriage had led to changed feelings and ideas about sexuality. The coming of other duties, especially once there were children, had usually led to a lessening of sexual intercourse, which men in particular experienced as a loss.

A woman noted that she could now talk about sex with other women. “I am not that shy anymore. I also want to teach my daughter myself. I don't want her to have to find out from others, like I did.”²⁷

For some older women, intimacy also took on a new meaning over time: “We cuddle on the couch. If you're young you want sex all the time....If the marriage is based only on eroticism than you risk that when that part is gone, your marriage is also gone”.²⁸

Homosexuality: Heterosexuality was portrayed as the norm. All generations either expressed ignorance of, or had negative feelings about homosexuality – though homosexuals were not generally abused.

A male respondent emphasized that he did not want to interfere with homosexuals, but generally kept his distance, especially from male homosexuals whom, he felt, could not progress because they could not start families.

A Muslim man, whose family has had some experience of homosexuality, was concerned that these persons were becoming bolder. Another noted: “It is almost as if they want to convert us because they feel free.”²⁹

Teachings about Polygamy:

One Muslim woman, noting that the Koran allows a man to have four wives, said she might not mind having another woman in her marriage, “if it was a widow who did not have anyone to take care of her.”³⁰

Another agreed that the Koran approved polygamy if the man could provide benefits to all the women, but added: “I am not in favor of it”. She said that in these times, with various venereal diseases common in society, monogamy was very important.

A Muslim man remarked that while the Koran allowed men to have more partners, if they can give them equally what they need and deserve, it also stated that it was better to have one woman.

Responses to Religious Rules:

Respondents accepted what their religions said about sexuality, but few succeeded in achieving an ideal state.

The researchers noted that many persons of all faiths practiced those aspects of their religion that accorded with their daily reality.

Perspectives on HIV Risk:

All respondents, male and female, could explain that HIV was a virus that could be transmitted through unprotected sexual intercourse; that it was important to have sex with only one partner; “but, if you have different partners, you better use a condom.”³¹

For the couples married more than 20 years, sexual initiation pre-dated the surfacing of HIV information in Suriname. The young generation couples (married 0-10 years) had all heard about HIV in school.

Muslims of all generations learned about HIV through educational sessions at the Mosque, and one Hindu heard about it at the temple.

The Moravian Church pastor indicated that training on HIV and related topics was now part of their youth pastorate curriculum.

Other sources of information mentioned were Foundation Lobi (National Family Planning Agency), media and friends. Some people also learned through work-related meetings and workshops.

Several women of various faiths linked HIV to homosexuals. A male respondent was convinced that an infected person might as well be dead, because life would be filled with suffering. These were the types of fears that some religious leaders had been trying to address. A Muslim leader said that his

message is: “You can find help; there is medication; there is still hope. Perhaps you did not use your brain; the sexual urge can be so strong; perhaps you are really sorry after all. You have your wife and kids. With the medication you can still see your children grow up; still do your duties as a father.”³²

Researchers found that unprotected extra-marital relationships had been common, despite knowledge of the widespread HIV risk.

Among the interviewed couples, all of the women claimed to have only one partner. They assumed that if their husbands strayed, they would use protection. A woman from the younger generation said that she told her husband: “You have a family now; be careful. If you do something outside don’t bring any diseases for me.”³³

Some female respondents said that they were safe from HIV because they no longer had penetrative sex. Overall, the general feeling among respondents was that, within marriage, there was no need to use a condom.

Beyond their in-depth interviews with the couples, the researchers did street interviews with 65 men and women, 21 of whom admitted to being involved in extra-marital affairs. Of these 21 (14 men and seven women), none used condoms when having sex with their official partners; seven of the men and four of the women used condoms with their extra-marital partners. The researchers noted: “The condom is used in situations where people suspect a risk, such as sex with a Commercial

Sex Worker or with a stranger. The institutionalized outside woman or man carries the risk that he or she is not seen as a stranger but rather as second wife/husband and therefore trustworthy.”³⁴

“The different Holy Books and Scriptures emphasize the celebration of sexual pleasure (and) most religious leaders acknowledge the importance of mutual sexual pleasure for the married couple...”³⁵

Based on their findings, the researchers made several recommendations with a view to building policy that is gender-responsive and programming that enhances the effectiveness of HIV prevention:

- Identify and support the work of religious leaders who are adapting to changing times, including those who support HIV education and HIV testing prior to marriage.
- Identify common ground between human rights – including sexual rights – and religious values.
- Challenge conflicts between human rights and religious practices: by ensuring the right to sexual information and education; giving

young people more rights to decide when they are ready for marriage; and acknowledging the reality of extra-marital sexual practices, thus enabling serious attention to protection against STIs.

- Increase awareness of revised moral and marriage legislation, to make this a yardstick for appropriate behaviour.
- Improve data collected on HIV prevalence – e.g. by testing expectant fathers as well as mothers, and stimulating HIV testing before marriage while also guaranteeing adequate counseling for couples at test sites. These would help ensure that efforts to change behaviour are properly targeted.
- More accurately present data on HIV prevalence rates.
- Design communication campaigns that can actually have an impact on how people behave.
- Make Basic Life Skills Education (BLSE) an on-going part of the national education curriculum; and take it to out-of-school youth through community institutions, sports clubs, cultural associations etc. Support this with culturally appropriate discussions on sexuality in the media. And address relevant myths and taboos through the media and various groups.
- Develop platforms and strategies to strengthen religious and other leaders as they address the pleasures and problems of sexuality, marriage and religion with youth and adults.

End Notes

1 'How About Us?. Exploring Religion, Marriage and Sexuality in Relation to the Risk on HIV'. Case Study on Suriname as part of the project 'Building Responsive Policy: Gender, Sexual Culture and HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean.' 2011. p4

2	Ibid p7	19	Ibid p80
3	Ibid p35	20	Ibid p80
4	Ibid p57	21	Ibid p83
5	Ibid p58	22	Ibid p74
6	Ibid p62	23	Ibid p74
7	Ibid p62	24	Ibid p74
8	Ibid p62	25	Ibid p69
9	Ibid p97	26	Ibid p69
10	Ibid p65	27	Ibid p69
11	Ibid p97	28	Ibid p75
12	Ibid p64	29	Ibid p77
13	Ibid p101	30	Ibid p66
14	Ibid p102	31	Ibid p84
15	Ibid pp102-3	32	Ibid p85
16	Ibid p79	33	Ibid p87
17	Ibid p80	34	Ibid p92
18	Ibid p80	35	Ibid p5

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

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