

## **Masculinity and Risk Behavior Among Youth in Thailand**

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**PAA 2005 (submitted to Sessions 305 and 116)**

### **Introduction**

This paper examines the relationship between masculinity and sexual risk behaviors among Thai male youth in the context of the rapid social and economic changes in Thailand in the last two decades. We argue that for Thai youth in general, but for males in particular, recent processes of modernization have crystallized adolescence as a life course stage which is increasingly seen as a period of life in which opportunities for experimentation, adventure, and thrill should be maximized. Consequently these processes have served to sharpen the association between male adolescence and risk behavior, in part because of the normative acceptability of risk taking, but also because of the increasing range of options and opportunities for undertaking risk behaviors that includes sexual activity, but also drugs, drinking, motorcycle racing, and gang activity.

Our research also shows, however, that a better understanding of the association between masculinity and risk behaviors for young Thai men is a critical step for developing programmatic interventions aimed at better health and life outcomes for young people in that country. Especially given the past and future impact of HIV/AIDS in Thailand, it is important to consider practical options for reducing risky sexual and drug-related behavior. Two potentially promising intervention entry points are 1) an emphasis on “positive deviance” through peer networks, and 2) schooling curricula that emphasize long terms goals of schooling, career, and family. Such interventions can lead defining masculinity less in terms of risk behavior and more in terms of social and economic success.

The paper is part of a larger collaborative study on transitions to adulthood in Thailand, undertaken jointly by Mahidol University, Princeton University, and the International Center for Research on Women. The present analysis is based on qualitative data collected in 2002 using two participatory research tools: life lines and mobility maps. Data were collected from two rural and one urban areas in the province of Kanchanaburi, Thailand, and covered young people 15-24 (separately by sex, age group—15-19 and 20-24, marital status and in or out of school status), as well as community leaders, mothers and fathers of adolescents. In all, therefore, we have extensive and rich information on the sexual behavior and how it relates to the stages, processes, difficulties, issues, support systems, aspirations, activities, and mobility associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood from approximately 30 different subgroups, culled from 60 transcripts and accompanying visual materials. The evolving meanings of sexuality as it relates to masculinity, femininity, adolescence, and the key activities and aspirations associated with these meanings have been a major focus in our analysis, as has been the effort at identifying programmatic and policy implications.

### **Social Change, Masculinity, and Risk Behaviors**

In Thailand, the relationship between masculinity and risk behavior has both traditional and modern origins. Though long-held ideas about masculinity in Thailand have always

included elements of risky behavior, modern ideas about masculinity expand these norms to include new means to express masculinity in risky ways and to solidify the period of adolescence as one where masculinity is crystallized and risk-taking is essential. Traditionally, a Thai male is expected to be a risk-taker, sexually promiscuous, and impulsive. Young men in particular are allowed to be self-indulgent and aggressiveness, with the idea that their behavior will be calmed by Buddhist practice as a novice at a temple, and later by the positive influence of a wife. In recent years, however, the influences of globalization and modernization have converged with traditional Thai ideas of masculinity to produce a culture of adolescent maleness marked by a sense of entitlement to adventure and risky experimentation. Our findings indicate that experimentation, risk behavior, masculinity, and adolescence are increasingly a joint bundle of association, especially in the minds of boys. They see adolescence as a period during which risk-taking is not just possible, it is necessary—the one chance boys will have to live free from the responsibilities of career, marriage and parenthood, which loom near on the horizon.

A major focus of our investigation is the relationship of risky sexual behavior to other risky behaviors. Our data show that there are a number of factors contributing to the expansion of traditional levels of “acceptable” risk as an expression of masculinity among young Thai men. Adolescence has emerged as a distinct period between childhood and marriage, and it increasingly takes place in non-family settings, such as school and work, where there are fewer social sanctions to non-compliance with traditional norms, and greater peer pressure to test new boundaries. As certain risks, such as premarital sex, become commonplace even for girls, escalations of risky behavior are necessary for young men to prove that they are adventurous and therefore masculine and powerful.

Second, consumption and leisure are more central to young people’s lives. Young people and their parents identify leisure as a central and legitimate domain of adolescent life, and spending money for movies, picnics, outings with friends, is seen as natural and necessary by both generations. For boys in particular, “tiaow” (the Thai term for “hanging out,” roaming”) is a key leisure activity that is an expression of freedom, bonding with other young men, and impressing girls. Related to leisure or fun activities is the desire for consumer goods, as extensively expressed by our respondents. This desire is fueled by increased awareness of products and goods available due to a more prosperous economy, media, and the sprouting of shopping malls even in provincial towns. Money to fund these wants is provided either by parents or through work. With more time and money to spend on leisure pursuits, youth are better able to afford drugs, motorcycles for racing, sexy clothes, and sex workers than youth were in the past.

Thus, increasingly risk behaviors among young men have sexual and non-sexual expression. Certainly, as is the case in a number of cultures, our data show that young men feel that sexual overtures, conquest, and promiscuousness are indicators of manhood. At the same time, however, we find repeated references to other risk behaviors as signs of masculinity as well. In particular, these include experimentation with drugs, drinking, motorcycle racing as part “tiaow,” and membership in gangs where violence is common. The data also suggest that sexual and non-sexual risk-taking are related but not always substitutable. For example, motorcycles are used not just for racing to impress girls, but also to increase the mobility of youth, giving them more opportunities for sex and drugs outside the watchful eyes of their families. On the other hand, however, drinking can be part of the ritual of going to prostitutes, but sexual risk taking doesn’t necessarily require drinking, especially as girl friends increasingly become an option for sexual activity.

## Limits to Risk Taking and Potential Intervention Options

An important finding from our data is that although there is widespread social acceptance of risk behaviors as key elements of masculinity, there is a strong sense even among youth themselves that these behaviors can become problematic when they lead to long-term negative consequences. As articulated by our respondents, risk-taking leading to bad behavior is a continuum, and young people recognize the difference between short-term adventure and long-term negative outcomes. Though some experimentation with sex or drugs seems to be the norm, these activities can cross into unacceptably risky behaviors when they result in unintended pregnancy, having to drop out of school, or addiction. The negative consequences of greatest concern for youth (and parents) are first and foremost: loss of schooling, job or career prospects, followed by unwanted pregnancy which may result in early marriage and dropping out of school to support a family, followed by fear of HIV.

Thus, our data suggest that while changes associated with globalization are fueling expanded options for risk taking among young men, they are also raising aspirations among these young men for success and achievement that can act as an effective brake on risk behaviors. And thus, some of the aspects of masculinity that make it problematic may also facilitate interventions to help reduce risk behavior. The competitive economic environment is creating concern among young Thai men about having a family too soon or ruining the chance for a good career. Thai youth also recognize the value of education not just for career outcomes, but also for gaining knowledge about HIV.

These findings suggest that just as traditional social networks and normative rules associated with families and communities served to both encourage and counter sexual and other risk behaviors associated with masculinity in the past, it may be possible to mobilize newly emerging social networks to counter the expanded risk behaviors that modern Thai youth are undertaking. Two especially strong entry points for potential interventions are:

1. Exposure to positive deviance among peer networks, and
2. Emphasis on the risk-consequences continuum in school curricula.

Since peers and school are the two most dominant influences in the lives of adolescents, strengthening the positive influences of these networks on young men may be one of the most effective strategies for ensuring more positive health and life outcomes. For example, in our study, youth frequently discussed the differences between “good” and “bad” friends as key determinants of behavior, including sexual activity, violence, drinking, skipping school, and racing motorcycles. Programmatic interventions can use the strength and importance of peer networks to promote “positive deviance” by encouraging the social value of “good” rather than “bad” friends. Beyond the family, teachers were also mentioned as a strong influence, underscoring the importance of staying in school for positive outcomes for youth. To the extent that school curricula and influential teachers emphasize the importance of long term goals for career and success—goals that young men already value—interventions through schools also have the potential for reducing the relationship between risk and masculinity, and instead focusing on success and masculinity.