Bleak prospects: young men, sexuality and HIV/AIDS in an Ethiopian town
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‘Normal’ and ‘abnormal’: Sexual practices

Tefera was born in Dessie in 1983. He has three brothers and one sister. His parents are civil servants and he perceives himself as belonging to a middle-income family. At the time of the interview, he was attending technical training in the evening programme of the W/O Siheen Comprehensive High School. He was also working and being trained on the work floor in a small woodwork shop in town. Tefera began his story by referring back to his early high-school days, and explained what he and his friends used to do in the Arera (bushy area):

Our [referring to a group of four close friends] life while we were in school wasn’t particularly pleasant. There is a bushy area called the ‘Arera’ and that was where we spent much of our time chewing chat with girls. The only time I failed to be put up a class in school was when I was in grade 9 and that was precisely because I spent more of the time in the Arera with girls and my friends than in school. Then it was like a fashion, every young man went in groups with other young men and girls to the Arera, and that place [Arera] used to be very suitable for sex play. The bush was so dense and the grass and other undergrowth was so tall that you couldn’t even see what was being done right in front of you on the other side of the bushes. It used to be a hive of sexual activity, and the whole place was littered with used condoms. There were even boys who frequented the place to snatch girls from other boys and rape them.

If you go to the Arera nowadays, the bigger trees and thickets have all been cut down and you can see a long way quite clearly without any obstruction. People can see you from way off and sex isn’t so pleasant a pastime if indulged in while others are watching. I remember once we bumped into a couple who were quivering with orgasm and we had to rush down the other side so that the girls with us wouldn’t see it. The girls with us wanted to know what caused such a sudden detour but we covered the matter up saying this and that, because we were afraid they might feel a little uneasy or ashamed (endiyedebenchew) if they knew. Hence you won’t feel so much at ease having sex in the Arera these days because you won’t have much sense of privacy. Because of these and other reasons, going to the Arera for sex has now become a thing of the past.51

One interesting and perhaps surprising aspect of male youths in Dessie is that school pupils, some as young as 15, rent a room (as they call it a ‘class’) in a group or individually while they are still living with their parents. The room is mainly used for chewing chat and dating.52 Tefera claimed that renting the ‘class’ is also becoming a thing of the past, although

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51 Contrary to this claim, an old man in Dessie stated that students who are supposed to be at school spend the day in the bush making love. I chanced to meet young people while they were making love in Arera forest, and the young man asked me “Father, father, please come and help me”. The bush is like Robit Market [name of a market place]. Many students flock to the bush to make love. How come students go to the bush for sex instead of going to school? This is corroborated by the fact that many of the students and street youths mentioned the Arera as one of the places that young people meet to start a relationship and for sex (see Chapter Three).

52 As I listened to my informants’ stories about their youthful escapades, I found myself contrasting them to my own schoolboy experiences. Certainly, renting room while living with parents appeared something new since my own days in Dessie. Renting a room was common for students who came from rural areas to study in towns, and I went through a more or less similar experience while I was studying in junior and secondary schools, as the school near my village was only to grade 6. After grade 6, I had to go to another school 12 kms away. Even then, my parents asked some of our distant relatives living in the town to take care of me, while providing all the supplies (grains, spices, rent) necessary for my keep. Lodging with relatives, I did not have a room of my own. I used to sleep in the living-room, spreading the local mat made of palm leaves (seleme) on the floor.
it is not disappearing as completely as going to the Arera. He thought that the new generation is changing and focusing more on their education.

But while I was at high school, if there was a group of young boys, renting out a class was taken for granted. I was in grade 9 and 15 years old when we rented a room as a group. What we used to do was lure some rich boys into the group who could account for a larger part of the rent and we would cover the rest. The room would then be furnished with some basic things such as mattresses and a tape (cassette player). We planned each day who should use it in the morning, afternoon, and at night. We also used to spend loads of time there chewing chat. At that time, we were young boys and wanted to acquire the sobriquet moody (muóegaa) and to earn this distinction we all thought we had to chew and chew and chew chat.

Tefera then explained his sexual history and experiences since his childhood sex play (eqaqa chewata), and narrated the tension and anxiety that he experienced when he thought of sex for the first time.

My first experience of sex goes as far back as childhood. I remember a friend (girl) of mine with whom I played eqaqa chewata. Well, I am sure we had no real sex, but we used to pretend sex saying this is my wife, so-and-so is so-and-so's wife and the like. But after I grew up and reached puberty, you know there was no such a thing as a class [private room] then and I was so timid. I made an appointment with a neighbourhood girl to whom I was quite close. And the days seemed to go dragging by so slowly (and I had fixed my appointment a little late). At first, I used to be so anxious about what my friends would say if they knew about my sex life. I was very afraid, petrified by the thought that something would go wrong. I sometimes thought of what I would do if I couldn't have an erection out of sheer fright. The thought of the shame that would befall on me if such a thing happened haunted my entire sleep and I contemplated what I would do. It wasn't that I loved her or any such thing; it was sheer anxiety that robbed me of my sleep. But at last the day came and I did not have many difficulties when it came to actually doing it. But after I had had sex with her, I developed such an aversion to her that I abandoned her. And that is still the way with me. I do not want to see a girl after I have had sex with her. It is not only the girl that disgusts me; it is also the act of sex itself. I often think "Eh! I won't get involved in sex again" after I've had it. But then I do it again. But I keep on wondering "Ech! Is this what sex is all about?" So if I really like a girl, I would prefer to hold her in my arms, caress and kiss her and do things like that rather than having sex, because once I have had sex, that is the end of her and me; it is over! There was one such girl whom I liked very much, but after we had had sex, I had such aversion to her that I did not even want as much as to see her again. I took to crossing the road every time I saw her, so we wouldn't bump into each other. I remember she herself was very confused and sent some of my friends to inquire what the problem was. She took the hint though and distanced herself after a while.

Tefera said that he cannot total up exactly with how many girls he has had sex, but he guessed the number would come to around 20. Of these, he claimed that he had sex only once with most of them. "The ones I can say were my girlfriends wouldn't exceed more than three or four". He then explained which sexual positions he liked most.

I have seen many, many types of sexual positions in the porno movies. But I do not use them myself. I don't think I will ever if I wanted to, as I wouldn't bother to remember them when it comes to actual sex. The films are the main source of education about sex position for most people and then they try to imitate them as much as they can. But you see, when I am having sex myself I will be far too much absorbed to recall what I have seen in the films and try implementing it. It is only after the sex is over that I think if I had tried this or that. But there are some methods I have adopted for myself. What I do is take a girl in my arms and kiss and touch her everywhere until she is quite overcome by her feelings. I kiss her until she faints dead away. After that I will do whatever I want with her. But I can say I do not use positions that much. Many of my male friends have told me that they like yefu [rear entry], but I am not very fond of yefu, I just don't like to see a girl from the rear like that. But it doesn't mean I have never tried it. I sometimes use yefu and other types of positions to see if it feels any different. But some girls do not share my enthusiasm for experimentation. They say they are not willing to have sex this way and that way because it hurts. But I think that they refuse because they feel ashamed or embarrassed and not because it hurts. It is, for example, very pleasant to have sex while Standing like it myself. But when I mention it to them, they just feel so ashamed and refuse. And you may tell a girl to have sex with you in a standing position the first time, but if she doesn't take the initiative herself the next time, you can't tell her to be like this and like that every time you want to have sex. So what I usually do is have sex in the
In Chapters Three and Four, an attempt was made to present love and relationships and young people’s perceptions of premarital sex and marriage in more general terms. Now is the point to approach more intimate behaviour and I shall discuss sex, sexual variations, and orientations. Attempts will be made to present an increasingly detailed view of sex and many of the issues raised above.

"Human sexuality is really nothing, at least nothing specific. It is nothing specific in an almost infinite number of ways. It is almost never the same even when it looks the same" (Simon 1996:145). As indicated in the previous two chapters, sexuality is socially and culturally constructed, and people in different countries or even within the same society often possess very different attitudes towards heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual practices. They also differ in how likely they are to engage in a variety of sexual practices: masturbation, anal/oral sex, different sexual positions, erotic approaches and techniques. The main questions addressed in this chapter are: What are young people’s concerns, fears, perceived pleasures, dangers, and desires related to sexuality, and different sexual practices? What do young people in Dessie consider (socially or morally) appropriate sexual behaviour for themselves and their partners, and to what extent do attitudes vary? Kenneth et al. (1977) argue that sexual behaviour may be judged as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ and the criteria for this judgement could be the existing state laws, religious or other moral codes, prevalent cultural values, the effects upon the individual. They also note that simplistic approaches define ‘normal’ sexual behaviour as the most common or ‘average’ behaviour. Therefore, why and under what conditions certain sexual practices and orientations are approved or disapproved is another question that this chapter will look into. The social values and beliefs of the group to which people belong influence the sexual standards individuals espouse and can affect their sexual practices. This situation poses another question: What are the various socially approved and disapproved sexual activities and how do young people situate themselves in relation to religious, media, and other dominant discourses surrounding sexuality?

This chapter shows that most of the young people (both school pupils and street youths) perceived ‘normal’ or ‘pleasurable’ sex exclusively as heterosexual penetration using the missionary position. All other different sexual practices and orientations (different sexual positions, oral and anal sex, masturbation, and homosexuality) were considered to be ‘dangerous’, ‘harmful’, ‘risky options’ and alien - imported from the West through pornographic films which do not belong to Ethiopian society. Their opposition to alternative sexual practices and orientations other than the customary one seem to have emanated from traditional moral and religious proscriptions condemning certain sexual behaviours as wrong, unnatural, or perverse, while at the same time permitting others only in their 'proper' context. For most young people, negotiating different sexual practices and orientations (other than the customary one) is perceived as tantamount to negotiating Ethiopian identity and moral standards, and submitting to European standards of morality. For some young people even asking them whether they had indulged in such practices generated intense shock and embarrassment. Multiple-partner sex, however, was a widespread sexual practice, and the young people did not frown upon it.

The information obtained from school pupils and the street youths is presented thematically. I begin the discussion with young people’s attitudes and experiences with different sexual positions, sex from beginning to end, multiple-partner sex and group rape followed by analysis of their attitudes and experiences with anal/oral sex, masturbation, and homosexuality.

‘Normal’ versus ‘abnormal’ sexual positions

Since sex and sexuality is surrounded by restrictions and modalities, the school pupils were asked to describe different sexual positions and which ones they considered ‘normal’. The
schoolboys listed a number of ‘harmful’ effects that using different sexual positions could result in. They argued that they would prefer people to have sex only in the appropriate way (through penetration of the vagina by the penis using the missionary position) and cautioned that doing otherwise might carry its own risks like: ‘dislocation of the uterus’ (ye mahetsen menagat); ‘digestive disorders’ (in cases of anal sex); and ‘disruption of the intestine’ (ye anjet mebetates). They said that all these ailments can be caused by such ‘inappropriate ways’ of having sex, though they did not indicate clearly which types of sex would result in which disorders and how.

There were a few other schoolboys who did not share in this general view. They noted that if the two partners consent (and by partners they meant male and female), they can have sex any way they please. Sex becomes abnormal only when it is forced. Showing some discernment, they commented that the concept ‘normal sex’ might exist in rural areas, but in towns there are so many ways of having sex that it is impossible to say what is normal and what is not. In rural areas the more traditional (the man on top of the woman) position might be considered normal, but in the urban areas there was such a variety of ways of having sex (they gave several names for the sexual positions discussed below), which made it impossible to pass judgement. They believed that people should not be bound to any rule if that gave them more pleasure and be forced to stick to vaginal sex. They personally did not see any problems with different positions. They argued that some achieve more pleasure through fondling the vagina with their fingers (‘finger fuck’ as they put it), some want to fondle the breasts as a way of making love, while others prefer oral sex. They commented that human preferences vary greatly even in sex and everyone should be given the freedom to do what pleases them most. Some of the school pupils went further and said that using the same sexual position again and again is boring.

As a matter of fact, if I ejaculate using one sex position, I have to use another position the second time. Using a single position repeatedly is boring, so it has to be changed. Any woman with whom I go out is as open as I am. Even if she is not open to begin with, I will make her to be so by telling her everything in detail. Finally, there will not be a distinction between a normal and abnormal sex between us. And we will have sex using any position we think convenient (Dejene 20, male).

Other school pupils said that they are aware of different sexual positions but claimed they have never used them.

I usually use the traditional (y esa ya) ‘up and down’ position where the man lies over the woman. I do not like to use other more elaborate positions. I know many sexual positions by name [he mentioned some of the sexual positions discussed below] but I have never tried these with my girlfriends. With one of my girlfriends, I used to lift her legs wide apart over my shoulders because her waist was so slender. I also used to let her be on top of me sometimes, but I did not find that to my liking because she often controlled the depth of my penetration to levels that did not satisfy me. I have also tried sex while standing, but I did not find that pleasant (Wodajo 19, male).

Overall, it seems that most of the school pupils limited the meaning of ‘normal’ or acceptable sex to ‘the missionary position’. The reference point for their opposition is based on prevalent cultural values, religious or other moral codes, and taboos which brand certain forms of sexual activity objectionable, indecent, or contemptible (newere). They also appeared to harbour a fear of some unintended consequences of using different sexual positions.

The street youths said that they talk freely among themselves of each other’s sexual encounters saying, “I did this and that” or “I ‘fucked’ this and that type of ‘fucking’”. The coital sexual positions they named and described were as follows (some of them quickly named many sex positions which made it seem as if they were reading from a catalogue).53

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53 It should be noted that different informants gave different names and meanings to the same sexual position, and I have taken the liberty of defining what they said on the basis of how the majority described it. There were times that I was unable to grasp the modus operandi of some of the sexual positions described. I still do not understand how some could be practised on the ground. It is
Ye qune bede (standing position) - done with both male and female standing on their feet. It was commented that the man and the woman should be of more or less equal height

Marfe tag tag (fast up and down movement just like pressing down the needle while sewing clothes using a sewing machine - literally pressing the needle -called marfe tag tag because of the speed during intercourse). It is a position in which the woman lies on her back and the man will be above her spreading her legs like wings, and then moves fast up and down

Amora jefe jefe (the way birds of prey [eagle, kite, crow and so] take flight) - a slower version of Marfe Taq Taq

Mesar be angefe (interlocking axe at the neck) - done in a sitting position in which a woman puts both of her legs over the man’s shoulders and the man’s body is raised above the floor.

Yefu or ye haula shete or yefndid (rear entry) - a position whereby the woman kneels down facing the bed and the man comes and penetrates her from behind.

Shenkurt ketefa (chopping onions) - done with the woman’s legs lying wide apart over some support while she lies on her back.

Ye enat abat (mother’s and father’s) - the traditional [missionary] position for sex with the man lying over the woman.

Qelebet agebabe (putting/inserting a ring) - a position reserved for having sex with heavy/fat women by inserting pillows around the woman’s waist so that the vagina is more visibly exposed. Some others called this simint kuter (number eight), that is putting a pillow under the female buttocks and leaving her body below the hips raised. They believed that this position makes a woman’s vagina open wide.

Mesqelena (crossroads) - a position in which a man stands up while a woman is interlocking her legs around his waist without touching the floor.

Kelay (up on or over) - a sexual intercourse in which a woman will be up on top of the man or where the man lies on his back and the woman sits on his penis putting her legs around the man’s waist.

Womber agatmo (pulling chairs together) - they put two chairs face-to-face, and cover the gap created with a piece of cloth so that they are not pinched by it. Then, the man and the woman sit on each chair facing one another and have sex. Slightly different but the same position is while the man is sitting on a chair, the female sits on him turning her face towards him and putting her legs on either side and they make love.

Yemberkek (the kneeling position) - where both partners kneel down and have sex while facing one another (“You kneel down just the way you do when you are disciplined at school”). When they are about to have orgasm, the woman would be on the bottom and the man would be on top while both keep their legs bent.

Wosfe timiz (twisting the needle) - where the woman rests her body on the wall, hangs one of her legs on the wall, and they have sex.

Gone le gone (side-by-side) - both partners sleeping side-by-side

With the exception of ye enat abat (missionary position) and gone le gone, most other positions were considered to be sexually deviant, and not as part of what is called ‘normal’ sex, in which the man penetrates while the woman lies on her back as their fathers and forefathers have done before them. The other positions were described as harmful to the women because of potential damage to the uterus. They noted that prostitutes submit to them for money and not because they like them, and sometimes even have to be forced into them. Such positions are also not good for males because they exhaust and harm them. Another
negative effect of using non-conventional positions was said to be the very emotional situation that may lead to pneumonia because the participants become heedless of draughts or the cold. They also involve hefty struggles and friction between the two bodies, which usually cause condoms to tear in the process. Most of them said that these positions were better avoided and are usually only assumed under the influence of alcohol.

Let us follow some individual cases in order to understand the street youths' aversion to different sexual positions. Kibrom is a 22-year-old male. He spends most of his time at the bus station washing cars and sometimes assisting the chauffeurs. When I asked him with approximately how many women (sex-workers) had he been out since he started to have sex, he said that they have been many: "I have had sex with about 60 sex-workers here in Dessie town. When I have gone into the countryside or to different towns with chauffeurs, I have also been out with many other women". I then asked him what type of sex positions he used with these women and which one of them he liked most.

I do not use different sex positions with anybody, though I know how to do so. I've seen them all in porn videos. I do not use various positions because I'm afraid of creating some problem. It is a disgusting practice and I don't want to use it. [Tell me why it is so disgusting?] There could be a bad smell you could inhale inside your mouth. [What is it? Be clear, what do you call it? What does it cause?] For instance, there is a position whereby she faces the wall while you come in from behind. You can be more prone to cold winds in this position. It's a position similar to that of an animal. She offers you her back and there is no way by which she can have your breath. However, you can be susceptible to bad odours from her sex organ that can cause you health problems. [Are you saying the odours come from her vagina?] Yes, it's from all her body parts and this unpleasant smell can cause an illness. The position that doesn't cause any harm to her or to me is normal sex sleeping with her side-by-side. For instance, merfe taq taq hurts or can cause pain to the girl because she spreads her legs wide apart during the intercourse. [What's the problem?] She has to spread and raise her legs; I think this is problematic (painful) for her. There could be many things she could feel but I don't know what they are specifically because I'm not a female. I do not use all the positions because I am considerate of all these women's problems. It is strangers who have sex only once with a sex-worker who force them to assume different sex positions with them. In some cases there are some clients who are asked by the sex-workers to pay a great deal of money (50 Birr), and as a result angrily force them to have sex in different positions. It is not the money that matters; you can get it any time. What matters is taking care of the woman, for you can probably have further relationship with her.

In short, all positions other than the missionary are perceived as 'disgusting'. His objection seemed to revolve around the health problems that may result from using different sexual positions. Surprisingly enough, the relationship between money and love/sex pops up in any discussion on sexuality, and this time the informant argued that clients who are asked to pay more by prostitutes compensate their expense by forcing the latter to adopt unconventional sexual positions. The narrative from a prostitute presented below also supports his assertion about money and other perceived health problems related with unconventional sex.

Once a man told me that he had ordered food and drink for a bar girl with whom he agreed to have overtight sex. After they had drunk a lot, they went to a bedroom and when he fucked her using one of the sex positions, that is he lay on his back and she sat on his penis, she vomited all she had eaten over the man. This is the least that might overcome a woman. And since 'positional' sex exposes their womb more than ever, the location of the womb will be displaced or the uterine wall will be injured. For instance, there was a prostitute I know who used to go in for different sexual positions, even though we tried to tell her not to, she would not listen. As a result of the 'positional' sex she had had, she fell seriously ill and it was her uterus. Once while using a particular position during sex, the condom bursts; her menstruation stopped, and she became pregnant. When she later had an abortion in the health centre, since her uterus had been ailing previously, she fell gravely ill, and she is still bleeding. All the other positions may cause air to enter into the womb, may dislocate the womb, and deform the legs. So, it is better to have sex the way God has blessed us with. A womb infection that is caused by 'positional' sex will never heal. You can only get better if you seek some medical treatment, but you will never be completely cured. Most of the time, when you ask the men for 50 or 60 Birr, they ask, "Do you know how to have positional sex?" If your answer is "No", they ask you to reduce your price (Bekelech, 20, street female prostitute).
These conversations give us to understand that different sexual positions and erotic approaches are perceived as ‘dangerous’ for those involved, particularly for the women. She also said that God did not bless any other sexual position other than the missionary one. She and other young people repeatedly claimed that these variations could probably hurt the uterus, but when asked how they learned this, their response was very vague just like the following: “I haven’t seen this sort of thing myself, it is only from what I have heard or from what is commonly said among the public and from what I read in an Amharic magazine named ‘Fert’ about the after-effects or consequences of trying out different sex positions”.

Despite their assertions, many of the informants were unable to give practical examples of the harm that using various sexual positions causes. When I asked another street prostitute why she hated assuming such positions with her clients, she said that she is very young and fears that this could make her womb wide and loose when giving birth. She remarked that the normal sex position itself is difficult for her, let alone practising misar be angete and other positions. When asked for further tangible after-effects of these sex positions, she stated that many people had told her of deleterious side-effects. Some of her friends, she claimed, advised her not to have such sex whatever the money she might be offered, as it can stretch the womb and makes it loose. It seems that there is wide-spread lay discourse that avers that different sexual positions (other than the missionary one) are dangerous, and harmful. Therefore, like the school pupils, most of the street youths regarded the missionary position as the most advantageous and ‘normal’ sexual position.

What is more intriguing is that they all were familiar with different sexual positions from pornographic films, but strong aversions to such practices were reported. Why they frequented such underground porno houses, which obviously show different sexual positions and erotic techniques, while claiming to detest such practices is a question that needs to be answered. It certainly reflects that rhetoric and practice are different and often contradictory. The evidence is that young people seem to be caught up between their curiosity to explore sexuality and moral and religious messages against such practices.

**Sex from beginning to end**

It is difficult to know all the details of sexual intercourse and the sexuality experienced by others. “For most of us, sexual behaviour is private. With whom we make love, how and when we do so, and even why we do so are among our most intimate and private matters” (Laumann et al. 1994:96). In short, what actually happens in bed is a private matter, and this fact should be taken into account no matter how sincere the informants are in confiding details of their sexual intercourse from beginning to end.

Degu (18, male) was born and brought up in Dessie town. He claimed that he stopped his education in 1998 when he was in grade 6. Because of the poverty in his family, he gradually started to work on the streets and help himself. He said that he never visited his family, and if he has money he slept in a rented house. If he did not have money, he slept on verandas in the street. He assisted cross-country bus chauffeurs in the absence of their assistants (fare-collectors), he showed them car routes in the hinterland if they were new to the area, and he arranged accommodation for drivers coming from Addis Ababa and other places. He washed and swept buses when they came in from different places; he solicited passengers and loaded their luggage. The following is a condensed description of the whole process of love-making as narrated by Degu.34

34 It should be noted that the information presented here is extracted from the lengthy interview. I started with less sensitive and simple questions about life, and proceeded to more intimate issues.
forest on the first date and started sex there. In the middle of this sexual intercourse, my body trembled and I felt some sort of happiness. When I told my friends this later on, they told me that it was an orgasm and I started to understand or realize that this is a common form of feeling. [What type of steps do you follow during sex?] First I pay the girls money. If they have their own bedroom we take off our clothes and lie down and have any kind of sex I want. [What do you do before sex?] We ‘warm up’ (prepare) ourselves, we kiss each other, and I rub one of her breasts gently. Penetrating and putting your penis ‘in’ and ‘out’ doesn’t mean anything, it can be boring if it is done many times repeatedly.

We prefer to give priority to chatting together, kissing, and ‘warming up’ and when we are well prepared (ready) and know each other’s feeling, we have sex. We first ‘warm ourselves up’. [What does ‘warm up’ mean?] It means to hold and rub her body and her breasts gently, to press my body against her and then we have sex (penetration) when we are well ready for it. I do not indulge in ‘warming up’ before sex if the girl is new (unfamiliar) to me. [Do you stimulate your partner’s sex organs by touching them with your finger?] I haven’t done this kind of thing. [Why?] My friends tell me that they do, but I haven’t done it myself. I frequently go to a porno house together with my friends. What I hate is when I watch the woman in the film suck the man’s penis and when he has cummings with her. [Why do you hate such practices?] It is disgusting and doesn’t conform to the culture of our fathers and forefathers. [Is there anybody who has cummings here?] I haven’t heard or seen such a thing. We usually see it on pornographic videos.

[Do you use various positions?] Yes, if we know each other well, we discuss it, and she agrees and lets me assume the various positions as I wish. If I don’t know the girl, I must first force her to have these sorts of different positions with me. [Tell me the different positions that you know] MarJa taq taq, amara jaf jaf, masar ba angate, yebnaa esbit/yefiu/yefindid. [How many of these positions have you tried?] I have tried all four of them. [Which one of them is good or enables you to enjoy maximum pleasure?] If you want to keep the feelings of a woman, you have slow sex (amara jaf jaf). If you are only concerned with your own feelings, you use the other two different positions (mathe taq taq and misar bangate). [How do you control your feelings during sex?] If you slow down the rhythm during intercourse, you can delay orgasm and can go along with the feeling of your partner. If you have fast sex, you ejaculate immediately. I am not supposed to be fragile or weak during sex lest I be rejected. I’ve to control myself and be able to delay orgasm.

[Do you talk to each other (are there any words you exchange with your partner during intercourse)?] When a woman reaches her climax, she holds you very tight and whispers a lot of things to you such as “I love you dearly”, “I love you very much”, and so on, and she falls asleep soon after having an orgasm. If it is you who has the orgasm, you say to her “I love you” (if she is your girlfriend); if she is a prostitute you say nothing to her. When I finish, she gives me something to wipe (clean) my penis and then I leave. [Why do you wipe?] After ejaculation you feel dirtied by the seminal fluid remaining on the penis so it has to be wiped off. [How long does sex take from the first to the last?] It takes many minutes (much time) because these days you have sex very carefully without bringing your bodies too close to each other because of the AIDS problem. If, for instance, you sleep with a prostitute it is the same as sleeping on the floor without mattress, because she is indifferent and has no feelings and it is only you who feel the sexual desire.

[How long does it take to reach orgasm?] When you are having sex, the vagina can be stretched or very narrow. Because they do not want any such sound to be heard during intercourse, women with a wider vagina hold your waist tight with their legs and hence you will soon feel tired and finish with them (reach climax) quickly, with out noticing it. It takes on the average five minutes, and if it is delayed it does not take beyond 10-15 minutes from the beginning to the end. I don’t take any longer time, as I don’t want to affect my body by spilling more energy. It is the warm up/fore play that takes so much time. Among my friends, there are some who ejaculate prematurely, and some who delay it a long time. [How do you know such things about your friends?] I know (have seen) this during group sex. We arrange that those who take a longer time for ejaculation have sex towards the last. [Do you look at each other during “group sex”?] We do not observe each other very closely, but are some distance apart.

[Where do you go for sex most of the time?] You have told me, for instance, that you had taken that girl to the forest, did you sleep there? At that time yes, we slept in the forest, but now that is an old-fashioned notion, nowadays you take a girl either to a friend’s room or you pay 6 Birr and rent a bedroom. Once, people were shyer and she could be afraid lest someone whom she knew or her parents would see her. Now everything has changed and the older you grow the more the fear lessens because it is what everybody does. [When you sleep with a woman for one night, do you only have sex with her once?] If we wake up in the middle of the night and if she is willing, we can have intercourse again. Usually I have sex only twice but there have been a few times when I have intercourse up to three times in a single night. [Does a sex-worker let you have sex free the next day if you have only paid for today?] If you are very sociable, you can sweet talk her and persuade her to have it with you. She can let you assume any position that you haven’t tried. [How is a condom during pleasure?] The pleasure you get when using
condom is minimal for your seminal fluid is prevented from entering her vaginal canal and as for you, you can feel blocked from feeling her secretion during orgasm by the condom. You will feel your muscles contract when having orgasm without condom. It is just like when you pour araki (strong local alcohol liquor) on your body so that your skin contracts. [How frequently you go out for sex now?] I used to have sex daily in an araki house near the Dashen Bank but now the house has been changed into a shop. [With approximately how many women have you been out?] They are many. May be about 70-80.

The foregoing discussion shows that kissing, petting, and lengthy foreplay appeared to be part and parcel of sexual intercourse, though more like a mechanical exercise, not much love or affection were involved. However, intimacy was mentioned as a condition for a lengthy ‘warm up’, the informant saying that “I do not do such ‘warming ups’ before sex if the girl is new to me”. Romantic remarks such as “I love you” are also reserved for intimate relationships (girlfriends) and not for prostitutes. He also conveys the idea of emotional indifference from the side of the prostitute, which is one of the defining characteristics of prostitution. Degue and most other informants associated intimate practices (like bringing the bodies close to each other) with HIV/AIDS infection, highlighting how HIV/AIDS has affected erotic practices. In addition to a lack of affection, the fear of HIV/AIDS infection seems to have excluded many aspects of foreplay and intimacy in sex. As will be discussed below, prostitutes also do not allow their clients to do the ‘warm up’ unless there is special attachment and intimacy.

Like most informants, he did not admit practising fellatio/cunnilingus, but claimed to have seen in pornographic video films. He did admit to engaging in different sexual positions in relatively long-term relationships. He indicated that the duration of sex is partly influenced by the size of the vagina and ‘manipulative’ techniques of the women involved. There seems to be a perception that early ejaculation emasculates or can cause men to be perceived as weak or ‘fragile’, eventually leading to their rejection by women. At the same time, too much sex or delaying orgasm is perceived as harmful to the body as it results in loss of energy. The association between too much sex and the sapping of strength is a theme that frequently recurred in the discussion of masturbation as well. As discussed in Chapter Four, he claimed that going to the forest for sexual intercourse is outdated as young people are no longer afraid of having sex openly in hotels and private rooms. He went to great lengths to express the difference in sexual satisfaction with or without condom, implying that sex without condom is more enjoyable. He seemed to believe that men and women need the vaginal secretion and sperm respectively in order to experience pleasure. His opinion about condom use was repeated by many young people (see the discussion on condom use in Chapter Six).

Multiple-partner Sex

Having multiple partners and exercising power over women is accepted masculine behaviour and in many societies ‘normal’ men should have as many partners as possible. Men see it as culturally acceptable, and even necessary, to have other girlfriends for variety. One woman does not satisfy a ‘real man’. Such masculine sexuality that encourages young men to have multiple partners, coupled with negative attitudes towards condoms, could expose them to STDS including HIV/AIDS infection (Holland et al. 1990; Wight 1994, cited in MacPhail and Campbell 2001). On reflection, these comments seem to be restricted and do not include females, who also maintain multiple partners. Ideally women, especially once married, are expected to remain faithful, but the reality on the ground is that some of them do have extramarital affairs and multiple partners, though they go about this more secretly than in the case of men (Gysels et al. 2002).

Likewise, multiple-partner sex, often without condom, seems widely practised among young people in Dessie town. Most of the school pupils recounted their experiences with multiple-partner sex (serial monogamy or concurrent). Teklu is an 18 year-old-high school student. He was one of the more vocal participants in one of the FGDs held with male students. In addition to having an opinion to express, Teklu also admitted that he has a girlfriend. He was then asked for an individual interview. He agreed and said that he has a girlfriend known as Zinash. But at the same time, he admitted that he had had sex with two
other girls (Selam and Hanna) two weeks before the interview. When asked why he slept with other girls while he was still in a relationship with Zinash (his girlfriend), and if he does not feel any guilt about ‘cheating’ on her, he replied:

_There is a difference between Zinash and those two. Zinash is my girlfriend and I don’t maintain her for sex alone, I love her and want to be with her forever. But as for those other two, I slept with them not because I had any special feelings for them but merely because I wanted to have sex with them (just for the sake of one-time sex). Of course, I do feel it isn’t right but I do not feel that much guilt. I think I do such things because I am young and feel it is proper for anyone at my age to have sex with two or three girls. Maybe I shouldn’t justify it like that but that is how I feel. It is all because of my age._

He tried to distinguish between loving relationships and relationships for causal sex. He attributed exploring sex instead of limiting himself to a loving relationship to his age. In any case, young people in Dessie seem to have become involved in a peer culture that accepts and may even promote multiple-partner sex. Another slightly older high school student (Bekalu 20) also noted:

_I usually leave them [girls] after having had sex once or twice. I don’t know why they like me but girls do, and I have never faced much of a problem in convincing a girl to sleep with me. I have had sex with a total of about 30 girls so far. I have dated friends in a row. There were times I used to have sex with two different girls in a week. I think the girls themselves have great sexual desires, and I suppose every one of them who accepts a date is also willing to accept a proposal to have sex or they wouldn’t have accepted a date in the first place. People say that women in Dessie say “Okay” to sex the first time you shake their hands and I suspect it is true._

He counted up to 21 of the girls by name and said he had lost the names of the rest. He added that some of them were virgins when he had sex with them. But he also remarked that he did not take the virginity of all of them. _“It is very hard for me to take a girl’s virginity in one bout of intercourse”_. Bleek (1976) remarks on the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about sex, and how the subject is prone to boasting and gossip. All the above assertions could contain an element of truth, but it is very difficult to accept them without harbouring a few doubts, as young people like to talk about sexual adventures and assume a ‘macho’ personality. Although it is considered an adventure and a sign of ‘successful’ masculinity to have many sexual partners, open and blatant interest in sex in Ethiopia is unwelcome. Those who show an interest in sex too openly are branded whores or _Kirzeran_ (over-sexed - usually applied to men). There is a tendency to appreciate sexual restraint and dignity, yet at the same time there is an admiration for womanizers. Given such a contradictory stance, it is very difficult to accept or reject the above claims fully.

Even some young women involved in the study mentioned that girls in Dessie have more than one boyfriend for financial security. When one boyfriend leaves, they have another to fall back on. In this regard a female high-school student (Sada 17) spoke about a well-documented case of multiple-partner sex. She said that there was one such girl who went out with a group of friends (five males) one after the other. When the boys found out, she said they agreed to repay her duplicity in full. One of them gave her an appointment and informed his friends of the place and time of their meeting. They came with a videocassette recorder (VCR) and raped her in a group, making sure every single thing they did to her was recorded on the camera. This story implies that a sexual double standard prevails, and having multiple sexual partners is acceptable even for married men but unacceptable for women, and they should be punished. In recounting the story of group rape even Sada and other young women appeared to have the feeling that the girl got what she deserved. This indicates that they felt that women involved in suspected or actual sexual infidelity must be punished and rape was perceived as a disciplinary measure and hence acceptable. Writing about America, Reiss (1968) maintains that sexual acts go beyond physical pleasure and express anger and a power motive (see also Campbell 2003; Gibson 2004).

Another girl (Birtukan, 18) added that there are indeed girls who see having three or four boyfriends as a reason for pride. They do this mainly for the financial benefits and other material motives, not for love or any lust motive. There was a situation in which a woman has
a relationship with three men: one for money; the second for love; and the third for sex. Interestingly, she maintained that this was not a thing peculiar to young people, but that the young have learned it from their elders. She knew of one old lady in her neighbourhood who was advising a young housewife to take an additional partner saying, “Don’t be fool, you better ‘grab’ some one other than your husband. He will save you during hard times”.

Some key informants also noted that as a result of a tradition they inherited from their forefathers, young men and women in Dessie do not limit themselves to one sexual partner. They maintained that a man who has slept with many women is considered a good man and a hero, and a woman who has sex with different men is also considered to be one whose beauty has been revealed. They claimed that most women, especially those who belong to the surrounding rural areas, are beautiful and their beauty is truly revealed when they have sex with different men. This is a long-standing tradition and they commented that the present generation practises what it has inherited from its forefathers. So it would seem that some young key informants blamed their elders for passing ‘promiscuous’ sexual culture on to them. One male key informant in his mid-twenties said:

*With regard to sex, we inherited it from our forefathers. They used to have two, three or more sexual partners. Therefore, our elders should not blame us, as it is not something that we have brought it upon ourselves. Our behaviour as well as our personalities have been born of theirs. We got it all from them. The only difference is that HIV did not exist then but prevails in our time.*

It appears that HIV/AIDS has instigated long-standing blame between different generations on different aspects of life. I conducted FGDs and interviews with the older generation, and they stated that HIV/AIDS is a punishment sent from God because of young people’s promiscuous sexual behaviour (see Chapter Six).

The key informants reported with justification that there are plenty of married HIV-positive people in Dessie, and this indicates that even though people are married, they are not being faithful to their marriage vows [though some of them must have also been infected before marriage]. They maintained that it is a common practice for a man to see a woman other than his wife. It is not considered indecent and unbecoming (*newere*). It is also not considered untoward if he had a child born out of wedlock. The family will be furious for a while, but after a lapse of time, what he has done will be ignored and people will start saying, “It is no big deal. After all, he is a man.” They also noted that it is common for a man to see another woman when he is away on duty in other places for fieldwork or business trips. The prostitutes involved in the study likewise noted that married women come to the hotel in which they work (for bedroom service) with men who are married to other women. They confirmed that married men also come to sleep with them. More anecdotal evidence is needed to underscore my argument:

*Most of the time, I do not see a husband who restricts himself to his wife. If I get married, I do not think that my husband will not go to another woman. But, I shall simply marry him even if I know that he will see other women. No man is reliable; most men who come to this hotel are married and have their wedding ring on their finger* (Saba, 22, prostitute).

55 Studies in other parts of Africa have also revealed that having multiple partners is perceived as a sign of sophistication (Nyanzi et al. 2000).
56 It was repeatedly stressed that having sexual relationships with more than one partner has become part of culture. If a woman has a relationship with only one man, she is then considered ugly and unattractive. If she has a relationship with many men, the implication is that many men need her and therefore she is beautiful; she can brag about being pretty and sought after by many men. The dominant discourse in the literature is about ‘successful’ masculinity expressed by having multiple sexual partners (Wood and Jewkes 2001). In Dessie, however, having multiple sexual partners is perceived as both ‘successful’ masculinity and ‘successful’ femininity, although a certain degree of prejudice exists about ‘successful’ femininity.
Overall, it is possible to conclude that multiple-partner sex is a widespread sexual practice in Dessie and more generally in Ethiopia. Ethiopian history reveals that kings and warlords maintained a host of wives and concubines and had a number of illegitimate children (Tesfaye 1988). The young people’s claim that they inherited ‘sexual promiscuity’ from their forefathers has a grain of truth. What is troubling is that this is the era of deadly HIV/AIDS and the risk of contracting it increases with the number of partners a person has. Beyond culture and agency, such sexual behaviour in young people can also be explained by wider structural factors. To many young people without the promise of opportunities in life and who have unstable living conditions, exploring sex with multiple partners (who are in most cases easily accessible) could be conceived of as the only pastime (to while away their life), and as an earthly compensation. It was not only multiple-partner sex that was prevalent in Dessie but also group rape, which I shall turn to now.

‘Group sex’

In Ethiopia, as in most societies, exclusivity is emphasized in sex. The young people, however, seemed to have developed their own sexual culture of raping in groups. Tafese is 20-year-old male student and he stated that he and his friends used to have sex with some girls in groups, and maintained that this was not a thing they were alone in doing or for which they started a fashion. It was quite usual in Dessie to have sex in groups of two to four with a single girl. He justified what he and his friends did because they saw other groups doing it. It is usually geshim (unsophisticated, green) girls whom they select for such sex; girls with whom none of them would want a relationship beyond the initial sex. If one of them finds such a girl, he will bring her to their ‘class’ and they will have sex with her (from two to four depending on who is interested). Here is how Tafese described the modus operandi of group rape. I quote:

“When there are four of us, for example, we don’t go in there [to the room] with her at once. We first agree on how much time each one of us should take with the girl. Since we usually do not go to great lengths to arouse such girls and are not one least bit worried about how she feels, we do not take any more than 30-40 minutes each. It is like going in, taking off your clothes, and then have sex and that doesn’t take very long. So after we have agreed up on the time allocation and decided who goes first and second and so on the one who has brought the girl goes in first and uses his 40 minutes as best as he can. After 40 minutes, if it is, for example, my turn, I will go and knock and tell him so-and-so has been looking for him all day and is waiting for him right now in such-and-such a place. Before I come, he will have told the girl to get dressed and not tell any of his friends who may happen to come that he had sex with her since they wouldn’t feel so good about it. So, when I knock all he has to say is ask me to keep the girl company and leave. And when I am through with my 40 minutes, the next in line will knock with some other reason and will take his turn and so on. I sometimes think the girls know that we are using some pretexts so that we won’t openly say “Get out! It is my turn”! But anyway they don’t really refuse: they may say “No” but it wouldn’t go beyond that. The girl thinks that we do not know that each one of us had sex with her, she will think we all think “It is only me who has had sex with her”. And girls are not unhappy about it. I mean none has shown us a miserable face, let alone put up a fight. It was only once that a girl even mentioned the others had had sex with her. It was my turn and she refused saying, “What are you guys doing! The other day all four of you had sex with me, and are you going to do it again”? I had to pretend to burn with rage and say “How could they do such a thing!” as if I didn’t know a thing about it. But when I and another friend of mine found her next day (and took her to the class), she inquired why the other two had not come. I am not sure what she meant by that inquiry, but maybe she had thought the two of us might not satisfy her, I don’t know!”

57 "It is worth emphasizing that having multiple partners is not a risk for HIV transmission per se. The risk is having unprotected sex with multiple partners. Given that behaviour in the early years of the epidemic ‘must be seen in a condomless context’ (Obbo 1995:81), however, these nearly amounted to the same thing. In Africa, where there has been historically low condom use, poor treatment of STDs, and a general preference for penetrative vaginal sex (as opposed to types of sexual or erotic contact that might be less risky), multiple-partner sexuality among some can be statistically related to increased risk of being infected with HIV" (Setel 1999:201).
This story presents a number of interpretive challenges. Tafesse justified their action because other people were doing it. This implies that young people seemed to have formulated their own sexual values and morals. He also simpliﬁed the mode of operation as being as simple as eating or drinking in a group, but one after the other. He conveyed that girls enjoy group sex, but I doubt the sincerity of his claim. His attitude appears that women are under an obligation to do what they are told and they deserve what is meted out to them. The other interesting issue is that forced sex in groups was never described as rape. They simply call it ‘group sex’ (using English).

Group rape (‘group sex’ as they call it) among male street youths appeared more widespread and part of their overall lifestyle. They revealed that they support one another and share many things in life. They sleep together and share blankets, mats, clothes and other pertinent materials. They also support one another ﬁnancially, and when one of their fellow street youths runs out of money, others have to share with him. Most of them claimed that they are unable to manage (sustain) themselves individually and hence help each other. They also noted that they assist newcomers to ‘their home’ (the street). Such mutual support for one another and sharing seems to have crossed over into the area of sex as well. Most of the street youths I interviewed recounted their personal stories related to ‘group sex’. Some narrated unbelievable stories of 12 boys raping one girl. They explained that when one ﬁnds a girl on the street or pays for a prostitute, he takes her either to the bush or a hotel, and others follow to share. Most victims of ‘group sex’ were young women who lived on the streets. They also visit the same prostitutes one after the other. One street boy told me a story in which almost all the street youths around the bus station were infected with gonorrhoea after having sex with one prostitute. He said that they were cured of it after seeking medical treatment at the FGAE.

Hamid is a 19-year-old street youth. He was born and brought up in Dessie. He was in grade 7 when poverty interrupted his education. His mother was a servant at a private residence; his younger brothers and sisters were beggars. He claimed that his elder sister and elder brother had disappeared, and nobody knows where they had gone. He earned money by carrying goods and cleaning cars around the bus station. Hamid reported that he and his friends practised ‘group sex’. I was then interested to know the details, and here is the dialogue between us:

[You have told me earlier that you were having ‘group sex’, what type of girls do you have such sex with, and how do you get them?] We ﬁnd such girls while we stroll around at night. The girls go out when they have quarreled with their parents. When a boy meets a girl when walking at night he asks her for sex and she cannot say no; or if she refuses ﬁrst, she will agree after having been threatened. It could also be with street-dwelling girls who live with us or with prostitutes. We take prostitutes by deceiving them into thinking that we are taking them to a client and when we reach a dark place, whatever cries for help or complaints they make, they are left after being raped in a group. In other instances, someone takes a girl (without her being aware of the risk) to a pension and others (one or two of his friends) hide under the bed or in the toilet and come out from there and have sex with the girl one after the other. There is one girl I know who was raped by a group of 12 of us. The girl is still in Dessie and looks unhealthy when you see her. Except for one who wore a plastic bag marked kattu [local plastic bag] as contraceptive, the rest of us contracted venereal disease because we did not use condoms.

[How do you or your friends negotiate with the girl?] First, I talk to and agree with a girl about taking her with me, telling her that I am alone (I take care she can’t see any of the others). Then my friends follow us and each of them waits their turn after she has ﬁrst had sex with me. [Do your friends watch you while you are having sex?] Yes, they watch me; there have been times at which some one has held the girl’s mouth shut tight so that she couldn’t cry for help and the other had sex with her. Those of us who do not take long to ejaculate have sex ﬁrst and the ones who take longer to have an ejaculation have sex towards the end. [Where do most boys have such ‘group sex’?] In front of the kebele [lowest administrative unit] ofﬁce and near the Empress Menen School in a place called kikir mascheresha [literally a place to consummate love or to have sexual intercourse]. The place is dark and virtually invisible and you can go there at night and do whatever you want. There is also another dark, quiet place in front of the bus station. Hardly anyone passes by and people who live nearby are not seen outside after 9 or 9.30 in the evening.
As discussed above, ‘group sex’ among school pupils involves ’diplomacy’ and calculated moves to conceal the matter from the female, whereas ‘group sex’ among street youths seems to resemble open group rape, often involving violence and cooperation in gagging the girl to prevent her from calling to be rescued. As indicated by Hamid, most of the victims of ‘group sex’ seemed to be impoverished street prostitutes, as the following story also attests. Meseret (18, female) was born and brought up in Assab, and she was repatriated from Assab to Dessie when Assab was taken over by the Eritreans. Since 1999, she has worked as a street sex-worker around the Piazza area in Dessie. After having so many interviews with street boys, I asked Meseret about her experience with ‘group sex’:

*Was there any occasion on which you have been raped by group of men though you had agreed to have sex with only one person?* Yes, I once went with one man because I thought it was only he who was going to have sex with me. But when we reached the bedroom, some of his friends entered one by one and I was unable to cry for help for there was no policeman nearby. There had been some security guards patrolling but they didn’t help me. *How many were they?* There were three. *Were they using condoms?* No, they weren’t using condoms even if they had some in their pockets.

Abeba (16-year-old street prostitute) also stated that there was a time she preferred to stay in her ‘home’ without any income and abandoned her work for a while for fear of group rape.

*If I agree to go with any one of them (street youths), the rest will wait for me in the field and I can be raped by a group of seven or eight. There was time at which I passed the whole night under an electric light pole lest such a kind of thing would befall me. It is something too terrible ever to contemplate and consider. Sixteen boys once raped one of my friends (a street- dweller). One young man talked to her when she came to the bus station and she went with him, but he called his other friends and they raped her after taking her to a forest where she could find no one to rescue her. The last boy left the condom inside her. She went to the hospital and doctors took out it of her. She would have died if all had left a condom inside her.*

Abeba thought that condoms left in the vagina could cause death, highlighting the existence of misinformation about condoms. As discussed in Chapter Three, street girls and prostitutes were not given enough protection by the police and other agents of the criminal justice system, reflecting the existence of structural violence on these unfortunate young women who are forced to fend for themselves on the streets.38

The street boys also happened to remark that if a female breaks up while in a relationship with someone, the discarded suitor resorts to ‘group sex’ as revenge.

*If you fight with a prostitute who has been your girlfriend for a shorter or longer period, or if you suspect her of going with another man, you make an appointment with her, and invite your friends to have sex with her after you have it (Kebede, 22-year-old shoe-shine boy).*

In line with this argument, another street prostitute recounted that five street boys raped her friend as part of punishment.

*Five individuals forced a friend of mine to have group sex. There was a thief my friend knew had committed a crime and she reported the case. The police arrested him. He was imprisoned for 15 days. Friends of his who knew all about it took a revenge on her by forcing her to have sex with five of them. After that they even mutilated her breasts and vagina. [How did they do that?] They used knives. The girl died later. The boys were arrested and are still in prison (Abeba 16-year-old street prostitute).*

These stories bear witness to the fact that rape is “an expression of power, hostility, aggression and dominance” (Feldmann 1992 cited in Gibson 2003:44; see also Gibson 2004). In short, the young people perceived group rape as part and parcel of disciplining and asserting dominance over women. Any attempts to end a ‘relationship’ or any suspected or actual sexual ‘infidelity’ by women had to be avenged by group rape. Hence, sex was perceived as a weapon of revenge, as well as a resource exchanged by women with men and

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38 Mequanint (2004) also reported that a street girl in Addis Ababa could be raped by five to six men just one night.
an expression of romantic feelings (Wood and Jewkes, 2001). Group rape among street youths could be also a reflection of their stressful life situation, dearth of love, sex, and money and lack of affection or even any respect from the general public (see Chapter Three).

‘Ferengis’ things’: Oral and anal sex, and pornographic films

These days, the common public discourse in Ethiopia is that young people are perceived of as a spoiled or morally corrupted generation. They are thought to be disrespectful of their culture, and more attracted to the Western culture they see on videos and cinemas. Their behaviour is associated with drug abuse, ‘wild sexual intercourse’ and other ‘bad’ habits derived from so-called Western culture. Pornographic movies can be seen in a number of movie houses in Dessie, and these flourishing underground pornographic video houses are perceived of as contaminating the young, teaching them to become rough and bold. Asrat (my research assistant) visited a couple of such places, and he told me that the size of the audience, which consisted of boys as young as eleven and twelve years old, was really surprising. During one visit, there were about 150 boys and young men crammed in a very small, untidy room that did not even have proper chairs. He sat on one of some very long logs with no more than 20 cm between each row. He was relatively comfortable, as there were many more people who were standing. The room was crammed to overflowing. Many others had to be told to return another time because there was no more space in the room; everyone was already standing on their toes to be able to see the film.

Asrat reported that he watched the film for a while; masturbation, sucking, licking, anal sex and various sex positions that seemed more like circus acts filling the screen one after the other. One of our informants had taken him there. He was a student, and was wearing his school uniform. Asrat inquired about whether he felt ashamed to go into such a movie house wearing his uniform. “It is nothing for a student to see a porn movie. Why would it make me feel ashamed?” he answered.

It appears that such pornographic films are the main agents of sexual socialization for most young people. But they do seem to have ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, they perceive them as a source of sexual socialization in a society where sex is not talked about in the family or in the school. On the other hand, they perceive that pornographic films do more harm than good. The following comment by Bruck (16, male high school student) is representative of the ambivalent attitudes of the young people, and reflects their uncertainties and dilemmas.

I have seen oral and anal sex in video films. I can say I have a fairly good idea of how and what should be done during sex. And I think anyone will benefit from knowing about such things before starting to have sex for himself. And these sorts of things can be learned about from many sources. You can, for example, talk to someone who is experienced in such matters and can advise you about them. You can also hunt for written materials on such subjects (although there aren’t many of them). You can also obtain such knowledge from porno films, though such films teach much more filth than knowledge. They greatly arouse sexual desire and aren’t good. And we Ethiopians have become a dumping ground for the rubbish of Western civilization. They dump their pornographic films and films showing karate on us and we think that what we have seen is modernity and, imitate it. Therefore, such movies are not that good and they were better not seen. One can read books, but even so books aren’t very explicit about sexual matters and as I said, there aren’t many books on sex one can find and read.

Although the rhetoric about pornographic films was negative, many young people seemed to be fond of watching them. When the informants, both street youths and students, were asked about the occasions and circumstances that stimulate and facilitate first-time sexual intercourse among youth, they were quick to mention video houses and the cinema as places where young people ‘learn’ the ways of sex and where they learn to imitate Western ‘decadent culture’ (see Chapters Three and Four). One boy, for instance, emphasized the role played by video films in encouraging young people to engage in sex. He said that young people do not draw a line between what should be taken as educational, what should be seen as entertainment, and what should be deemed as trash in the films dumped there by the
Western world. He said that the video films serve as the main instigators of rushing into sex - to try in practice what they have seen on the videos. The key informants involved in the study also emphasized how such pornographic films ‘eroded’ the culture and traditions of their society and exposed youths to HIV/AIDS and related problems. Perhaps because of such discourse, the government closed most of these underground pornographic houses in early 2002, and I do not know what has happened to them now.

Undeniably, oral and anal sex are perceived as ferengis’ (foreigners, especially Westerners) sexual practices and ones that are strongly associated with watching porno movies.

Especially, those people who have such dirty sex as oral and anal sex are known for watching porno movies. I think that it is ferengis (foreigners) who are known for this. Ferengis engage in oral and anal sex and all different sexual positions with great attention and calculation. However, since our young people don’t see the care the foreigners take, but only the sexual act itself, they focus primarily on imitating the sexual positions paying little heed to having safe sex (Zewge 24, male leader of Anti-AIDS club).

Both Bruck and Zewge reproduced the public discourse that situates ferengi (white people) with sexual openness (experimenting anal/oral sex, homosexuality and other ‘unconventional’ sexual practices).

What they say also shows that education about HIV/AIDS is superficial and has not addressed all the HIV/AIDS risks, transmission routes, and preventive measures. It is proven that oral sex is a less risky sexual practice in transmitting HIV/AIDS than vaginal penetrative sex. Nevertheless, almost all the informants perceived oral sex as the most risky sexual practice.

Oral and anal sex are the main means of the spread of HIV. Especially oral sex transmits HIV from the man to the woman. This is so because the man's sperm can be splashed into the woman. However, since the woman produces nothing but saliva from her mouth, even when she is infected she cannot transmit the disease to the man. Besides, these acts are dirty and do not accord with Ethiopian culture (Shigut, 20, male student).

It seems that such perceived risks associated with oral/anal sex privilege vaginal sex to the extent of arguing that it is less risky than oral sex in transmitting the HIV virus. Such misconceptions highlight the importance of providing young people with broader sex education related to HIV prevention.

Some school pupils expressed extreme aversion to the thought of practising oral and anal sex. Dejene (20, male student) described sex saying, “Before you start having sexual intercourse, you kiss and lick her breasts, lips, her body, and her hands”. I then asked him [What about you licking/kissing her vagina and she licking/kissing your penis?]: When I asked him this question, he shouted with disgust (jumped up from his chair in disbelief) and said, “This is very despicable and alien to our culture. It is not common in our country. I have never heard about it in Dessie”. In discussing other sexual practices, Dejene appeared liberal and approved of having sex using different positions and even claimed that it would be boring to use the same position every time. Another student also believed that oral sex is alien to Ethiopian culture, faith, and religion. From the health perspective, he claimed, sucking or licking the genitals of men and women could cause allergic reactions. This is because such organs are used for excretion. He said that he knows a man who suffers from a lip allergy. He believed that the man contracted the disease when he licked the genitals of a prostitute.

The questionnaire data also produced the same conservative response. Twenty-seven percent of school pupils expressed agreement and 73 percent disagreement to the question: “Some people say that if the two partners agree they can have sex the way they please: vaginal, oral, or anal”.

Individual attitudes towards oral and anal sex varied among male street youths. Although very few, some street youths were open-minded and argued that they would not mind it if the opposite sexes had sex in whatever way pleased them. The majority, however, expressed a conservative opinion and disagreed that any kind of sex that pleases a couple was acceptable.
They said that even married couples have to stick to the usual methods of having sex, because sex has only two purposes: to satisfy one's sexual desires and reproduction, and both purposes can be satisfied through vaginal-penile intercourse. They added that it would not be good for children to grow up hearing or seeing oral or anal sex within their families. One informant said that he heard that when semen is released inside the rectum during anal sex, worms begin to grow internally, and then the person who received it will be a 'homo' and anal sex would have the same effect on girls (it would make them lesbians).

Other informants said that they had heard reports of oral and anal sex but had not seen any of it or experienced it themselves. They said that such practices are newere (abnormal/impolite/indecent), and added that licking the vagina with the mouth/tongue that eats bread and injera (flat pancake which is a major staple food in the country) is absolutely newere that God does not like. One added that he has seen such things only in the pornographic films and he opposed such practices because they are contrary to culture and contrary to nature. He added that both the man and woman have organs designated by nature for sexual intercourse and they should use them appropriately. Therefore, street youths perceived oral/anal sex as poor, bad substitutes for the 'natural' act. Let us follow the following dialogue with Demissie (20, male street youth):

[It is said that there are some young people who practise oral/anal sexual intercourse, how do you view these things?] I haven't come across them, except for what I hear from rumours. There probably could be such cases because a wide spectrum (range) of behaviours is found among different human beings.  
[What about you, do you acquiesce if there is a woman willing to have oral or anal sex with you?] It's alien to our culture and is not good. Why should we wish to use something sinful instead of the normal behaviour, which is given to us blessed by God? It is not good if there are those who practise such sex knowingly. It is no different from an illness. [What do you mean by an illness?] /laughter/. There are many diseases that can be transmitted through anal intercourse, and orally if, for instance, the man urinates mixed with blood. [What about if it is done with a condom?] The condom was not designed for oral sex. It is because of all this that the Lord visited the diseases on us. It is foreign to our culture and is very disgusting. [There are, for instance, some women who do like to suck the penis, what would you do if you come across any such women?] I'd force her to leave the room. I don't like these kinds of thing for I want to keep my life healthy. If she refused to go herself, I'd leave the room myself. I don't want to try because I have convinced myself that it is bad. It's contrary to our culture and is also harmful to females.

[What's the problem if she sucks your penis and if you lick her vagina?] It's disgusting; it is no good for our health for secretions from the sex organs can enter (into) the mouth. I don't think such sex is practised in our country. I have only seen it in videos. [What is the problem if both of them are in love and agree to have such sex?] If they agree and if he likes it, he can lick the secretions from her sex organs, everybody's behaviour varies, just like their faces. I haven't yet heard of any person practising it here. I myself think that it is disgusting. Every body part has its own purpose. However deep my love for her was I wouldn't like her to suck my sex organ or me to lick hers. When God created us, He gave us a mouth to eat and speak with but not for sexual purposes, isn't that so? Instead he gave us appropriate organs with a purpose for such functions. It is not through such sex that love is expressed, but it is through being considerate to one another in times of hardship. It is not good at all. We are not the same as the ferengi (white men), and it is not expected of us that we adopt what we have seen from them. [What do you mean when you say we are not the same as the ferengi?] We are not the same because they do many things during sex as we see them in video the women sucking the man's penis. It's disgusting for us to watch. From what we know, our ancestors usually had normal sex lying side-by-side or the man on top of the woman. There is indeed sexual attraction between opposite sexes and it is clear that a man cannot live without a woman, but a sex partner is not supposed to be hurt by emotional and abnormal sex. Both sex partners should sleep side-by-side together and are supposed to have appropriate sex. And instead of being passionate for instant sex, they have to be far-sighted about the future so that they can both have a baby any time.

In the conversation above, like that about using different sexual positions, anal and oral sex is perceived as harmful (problematic), particularly for women. However, when asked what harm they cause exactly, many were unable to articulate what this was. It seems that the resistance is simply because it is perceived as an 'anti-social' or ferengi sexual practice. Another interesting issue is the informants' strong argument advocating sticking to the natural division of tasks as designated by God. They thought that it is unnatural and confusing to use the mouth/tongue, which is designated for eating and drinking, for licking the vagina or
sucking the penis. The other important point is that the practices of the parental generation provide the basis for approving or disapproving of current sexual behaviour. Hence, "It doesn’t accord with our fathers’ and forefathers’ culture" was the most frequent response. Through a preference for vaginal penetrative intercourse to other forms of intimacy, the informant also conceptualized sex with reproduction saying that "Instead of being passionate for instant sex, they have to be far-sighted about the future so that they can both have a baby any time".

However, Kebede (23, shoe-shine boy) said that he asked prostitutes to suck his penis, and admitted that he enjoyed it very much. At the same time, he said that licking the vagina is ‘disgusting’, and that he did not like to do it.

There are times I have done it on request. If I stay longer with a prostitute [as a client], I will ask her and she will be willing. We understand each other in sexual relations. I used to have it. [Is there a time you licked?] No, I don’t feel comfortable if they request me to do so. I will not do it. It is disgusting. While they are doing it, I am happy. I also have anal intercourse with women. It is good. No problem. While having sexual intercourse you will move your organ into the rectum. It is better than the other one (vaginal sex), particularly if the woman’s vagina is very wide. The women also like it. Most of the prostitutes, if you are regular client and understand them sexually, will offer it to you.

This discussion implies that prostitutes consent to oral sex when a man stays with them longer as a client. Interviews with the prostitutes also revealed their willingness to provide what I call ‘special offers’ for clients who are very intimate. These special offers are only given to regular customers and include: kissing, fondling, fellatio, sleeping without tops, different sexual positions, and sex without a condom. The following anecdote from Geni (24-year-old prostitute) substantiates their selective offers to regular clients and their extreme aversion to oral sex as well:

... We discuss everything openly. I tell him to do this or that to me. We usually make love naked and on top of the blanket, as we don’t hide anything from one another. He warms me up, kisses me, and does ‘finger’ me. When I finally come (flat swotaj), we have sex (cherches). If you do not tell this to anybody else, I will tell you something. I gave this to Megehu [her regular client]. I pushed my two breasts together and he inserted his penis in between. Finally he ejaculated on my chest. This type of sex could make sense to a man but not to the woman. I will take off all my clothes when I sleep with him because I know that he is neat and clean, but I don’t take off all my clothes for any of my clients and I don’t let them bring their body too close to me for fear that they might probably have itches (rashes) or some other communicable skin disease. I won’t take off my underwear; I will take off my skirt only. I quarrel with many of them because I refuse to take all my clothes off.

The man with whom I slept yesterday wanted me to give it to him in my anus. I told him that my anus is very narrow and also I was not experienced. He began nagging and telling me that there would not be any problem if we used a lubricant. When I warned him that I would leave the room if he did not stop nagging me, he kept quiet and we had yengal [face-to-face]. There are many types in their sexual preferences. Some ask us to suck their eqa [object]. We see women sucking men’s penises in films but Oh, in the name of the Father and the Son, how ugly it is! I will not suck any one’s penis. I had this experience. One day a man asked me to suck his penis, when I refused he hit me with a bottle, and I hit him back and walked out on him. I told him, “What do you think it is to ask me to suck your eqa? A baby’s feeding-bottle”?

It appears that oral/anal sex was rejected because it is ‘unnatural’ or ‘ugly’. In addition to emotional indifference, her position against taking off clothes or getting closer to her clients’ body seems to have arisen from a fear of HIV infection, thereby highlighting that misunderstandings about HIV/AIDS transmission are also creating an unnecessary marked distance and arguments between prostitutes and their clients. Most of the prostitutes involved in the study recounted their fear of getting infected by mundane practices only distantly related to HIV infection.

The foregoing discussion indicates that vaginal intercourse is perceived of as the only appealing sexual practice in a heterosexual relationship. Oral/anal sex is seen as sinful, ‘disgusting’, and alien to their sexual culture. Although there were very few who viewed fellatio positively, young men without exception perceived cunnilingus as ‘disgusting’. What
is interesting is that almost all of them admitted to having seen anal and oral sex in pornographic films, thereby highlighting the tension between their curiosity and prejudice.

**Masturbation**

Setel (1999) notes that masturbation is the first sexual experience for many young people. Masturbation for young men is part and parcel of childhood playing or swimming. Likewise, eight- or nine-year-old girls stimulate themselves using a variety of objects. He argues that such sexual activities were perceived as part of growing up.

There was some degree of misconception and abhorrence regarding masturbation, with some of the school pupils agreeing, “it is not an act which people in their proper minds could possibly do”. Responses to how and why it is done were:

- *It is done by making a hole in the ground and inserting one’s penis in it*
- *It is done through computers (viewing porno pictures on computers)*
- *It is done by those who view porno films*
- *Such a thing is done by those whose minds have been distorted by the effects of chewing chat and the ‘good state of mind’ or feeling high (mirkana) that follows it.*

Some of the younger school pupils said they had never heard of masturbation, and their ignorance seemed genuine. Others described masturbation properly as:

> You just draw a girl in your mind and spark off your urge. When your urge has been aroused and your penis erect, you just put saliva or something else on your hand, and obtain ekan (satisfaction/ejaculation). This is what siga means. I have never tried it, but heard that it swells the penis when practised for the first time (Bogale, 18, male student).

Though he described masturbation correctly, he denied practising it. “If sex is such a delicate and uncomfortable topic for conversation”, argues Van der Geest (2001:1385), “it is no surprise that one encounters extremely contradictory statements”.

One boy in one of the FGDs argued that masturbation is against human nature, and will cause more problems than satisfaction. He said that those who resort to such practices are more like a wild animals than human beings; their animalistic tendencies are greater (he distinguished between two components of human behaviour, the animalistic component that is pleasure-seeking and the moral and dignified human component), and added that it is when the former component dominates human behaviour that such ‘horrible’ things are committed. He claimed that human beings are creatures with souls and morals and should not indulge in such things. But there were a few others who opposed such an outrageous attack on masturbation saying that masturbation has many advantages. One Muslim student mentioned that during Islamic prayer (solat), if a friend of his is made ‘unclean’ (ketenejese) or if his penis gives him problems by erecting itself (‘standing up’, as he called it), he would bring it out (the semen) and get relief and ‘cleanse’ himself through masturbation and wash his body afterwards. He commented that if semen is not removed from the body, the body will not be clean (kalewota degmo sewnetachin yekosheshal ena kezech hulu be zihe mengede maswotat yeshalale). He remarked that masturbation helps as an outlet for sexual feeling.

> You do it to control your sexual explosion. My friend and I used to masturbate, but the feeling is painful so that it is better not to do it. But unless we masturbate and cleanse ourselves, we are not allowed to go

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39 When I administered an Amharic (Ethiopian official language) questionnaire, many school pupils asked me what siga (masturbation) and gibere sedom (homosexuality) meant, but the inquiry was less frequent when I administered it to mature young people from W/O Siheen Technical and Vocational school.Cogently, it seems that some words related to sexuality are known only in English as a senior staff member from Addis Ababa University also asked me what siga meant after reading my article on street youths. The whole situation highlights the absence of a culturally meaningful vocabulary to talk about issues of sexuality in Ethiopia, which in conversations related to sexuality are referred to in indirect and ambiguous ways.
Another schoolboy added that masturbation is a good way of ensuring one’s safety from HIV since it only involves oneself (erasen marekat). If one cannot abstain from sex until marriage (which could take up to 30 or more years of one’s life), then siga is the only sure way of satisfying one’s sexual desires without risking the possibility of infection with HIV, he said.

Releasing sperm outside of the vagina is perceived as a sin, as the following story narrated in another context reveals. Yigzaw broke up the relationship with his girlfriend after eight months (see Chapter Three). They slept together for eight months but he claimed that they did not have penetrative sex. Explaining the reason, he said: "Whenever she screamed in some pain, I always broke off the sex, and many times I had to ejaculate outside. It is because of this that I sometimes feared she had even separated me from God (my Creator) as well.” He believed that splashing sperm outside of the vagina has separated him from God since he has committed a sin. This is not a surprising argument as there is biblical reference (‘Onanistic crime’) to masturbation (or rather coitus interruptus) as a sin.60 Another Muslim boy expressed ambivalent feelings and argued that it is forbidden in religion (haram), and considered a sin. But it might also be good for young people to satisfy their sexual desires by themselves, thereby protecting themselves from HIV. He did claim that he has heard its ‘bad’ effects - that it leads to infertility and also results in weight loss. But he was not sure if these claims were true and wanted us to verify them. Even those few school pupils who admitted practising masturbation never failed to mention its side effects.

As it is a natural feeling, we cannot deny it. I used to resort to siga just because I had a natural drive like any other man, but I abandoned it when I got a girlfriend. However, when I stay away from a woman longer, I do siga while in my bed or taking shower, imagining a woman whom I want to have. It has caused me no problem but I read in a magazine that it could cause premature ejaculation and fosters the hatred of a woman (Mekbib, 22, male student).

Incontrovertibly, anxiety about masturbation is widespread and most of the informants mentioned one or more ‘side effects’. Appropriate sex for most schoolboys involved in the study is only penetrative vaginal intercourse, and other practices such as masturbation are inadequate or inappropriate. Though most of the informants denounced it, it is reasonable to speculate that masturbation is a stigmatized but widespread sexual practice among young people. In the questionnaire, they were asked the following provocative question: “Some young people say that masturbation is one way of ensuring one’s safety from HIV and that young people should adopt as an alternative sexual practice”. Twenty-six percent of the informants agreed and 74 percent disagreed with the statement. Key informants working on sexuality and HIV/AIDS were asked whether the quantitative results closely approximate the reality; they believed that most young people in Dessie masturbate but deny it out of shame.

Similarly, almost all of the street youths involved in the study agreed that siga is not a good thing to do. They declared that they had either read or heard that it leads to sterility, mental problems, and causes spinal deformation, reduces interest in the opposite sex, and causes difficulties with the eyesight. When it was hinted that some young people consider masturbation the best means of abstaining from sex and that it reduces their chances of contracting HIV/AIDS; they asked how could it be seen as an alternative if it shatters one’s hope of one day living with a wife and children by causing sterility and madness and reducing one’s interest in girls.

When a man uses masturbation, he imagines a certain woman while fondling his genitals. If you bring him a woman and ask him to have sex with her, he won’t have an erection (Shemsu, 21, street youth).

60 As the scripture says “Onan...spilt his seed on the ground every time he slept with his brother’s wife to avoid offspring to his brother. What he did was offensive to Yahweh who killed him” (Gen 38:9).
They added that frequent signa is not good because it causes weight loss (losing sperm is usually understood to lead to the loss of body weight).

If you buy sex, you will not do it every now and then because you need money to do it, but signa requires no money and, if you are used to it, you are likely to do it often and lose weight pretty quickly (Tasnail, 20, street youth).

He had only tried it once and that was enough to convince him never to do it again because, as he claimed, it made him feel so drowsy that he could not even walk properly. Apart from that, he did not see any need for it while there are so many prostitutes out there. Tarekegn is a 24-year-old shoe-shiner around the Piazza. He dropped out of school and had been in the army. I asked him about masturbation, and the response was amazing for a person of his age. I can, however, fathom a sense of sincerity in his ignorance about masturbation.

Almost all young people who rejected masturbation as an alternative sexual practice gave several deleterious ‘side effects’ of masturbation. The fact that Tarekegn did not come up with any specific ‘harmful’ effects implies that he was not familiar with masturbation and associated lay discourses.

Some young people gave contradictory information, indicating that rhetoric and practice are different. Abe (23-year-old street male) claimed that he has to have sex after chewing chat and drinking alcohol.

He knew what masturbation is about but denied practising it. The following dialogue shows how he contradicted his claim above

Earlier he said that “If I drink alcohol it is a must for me to have sexual intercourse”, but at the end he contradicted himself and said “If I don’t have enough money I will convince my
mind to drink and sleep alone". It appears that Abe and many other young people practise masturbation but deny it since it is perceived to be a perverted sexual practice. The story represents that what young people say can be very different from what they actually do, and what they say can depend on the context, including the frames of reference that are offered.

There were few street youths who openly admitted to practising masturbation.

> I have practised masturbation myself: when you get excited and if you don't have money, you rub your sex organ with saliva. I was living in a rented house for some time and when I went to the house during the day (when my friends were not there) and when I slept alone during the night, I used to masturbate. But I started to feel tired (Kiros, 18, male street youth).

As is the case with many informants, Kiros also mentioned side effects of masturbation, saying that it makes one weak and the body shakes when carrying goods. When I asked him if he has encountered such feelings, his response was "No", and he claimed that it was his friend who told him about it. This and other stories narrated repeatedly imply almost all street youths perceived masturbation as harmful. The sources of their knowledge about the side effects of masturbation are most of the time hearsay or gossip. Except for hearsay, almost all of them (including those who admitted practising it) were unable to articulate what they had experienced practically as a result of masturbation. Lack of complete, accurate information about human sexuality and growth, as well as cultural taboos on talking about sexuality openly partly explain these perceptions about masturbation. Pertinently, street youths equated losing semen with losing weight and energy. Hence, excessive sex is perceived as harmful or tiring, and most of street youths harbour a semen anxiety. The following conversation with Wole (street youth aged 20) substantiates my argument.

> [How long does sex take from the first to the last?] It takes about 15 minutes from the beginning to the end. Because I fear losing more energy and affecting my body, I don't take a longer time. I have to replace what I have lost during the sex. [Why do you say that "It makes me lose energy from my body"; does sex really make you lose strength?] Aha! (Laughing), Yes it really does, you can't regain within two or three days what you lose during a single bout of intercourse. [What do you lose?] I lose sperm. As a car needs oil and grease to minimize friction, your body (skeletal system) needs sperm. If you lose too much sperm, you will find your body very stiff; I am afraid that these sorts of things would happen to me. [Is it those who who have sex frequently who could could have stiff bodies?] So it is said, but I haven't seen this myself, from what I heard, there are some who ejaculate up to ten times during one night and the bodies of these persons will be stiff in the morning. They will be unable to move easily and bend their elbows and knees. I'm being practical, taking care of myself because I'm afraid of such things.

Since Wole worked around the bus station washing cars and assisting chauffeurs, he drew an analogy between the function of sperm in the human body and that of oil and grease in cars.

In many societies, sex is perceived as a tiresome task that drains one's energy (see Van der Geest 2001), and Wole also argued that frequent sex could severely affect his physical health. Gagnon and Parker (1995) also state that masturbation is associated with the loss of vital bodily fluids through ejaculation, and folk-medical theories in the early decades of the eighteenth century expressed similar ideas. Gagnon and Parker argue that though the medical theories have changed from time to time, masturbation anxiety and phobia had continued support in medical communities until the twentieth century.

'Dirty': Perceptions of homosexuality

Hekma (1999:79) argues "[E]very period and culture has produced its own forms of same-sex desires." Likewise, attitudes towards homosexuality differ greatly from place to place and time to time. Although with a dramatic erosion of credibility and confidence, most of the dominant institutions of society worldwide continue to define homosexuality as undesirable (Simon 1996). This author argues that since procreation presumes the heterosexuality of sexual partners, reconsidering homosexuality means reconsidering the existing privilege of
marital sex and procreation. Therefore, except for the most homophobic, the fear of homosexuality emanates from the privileging of marital sex and procreation since time immemorial. By the middle of the twentieth century, homosexuality had effectively lost its status as a perversion, or even a significant deviance. Since specific behaviours (oral/anal sex) that used to be associated with homosexuals have become the common practice of large numbers of heterosexuals, homosexuality will continue to lose its status as a perversion". (Simon 1996)

In Ethiopia, homosexuality is so strongly disapproved of and it is virtually impossible to talk about it or come across the topic being discussed. Homosexuality is not only perceived as a sin or deviant behaviour but also as a crime. Under Article 600 of the Penal Code of 1957, homosexuality is an illegal sexual practice punishable by imprisonment. Unpublished Police Annual Reports for 1978/79 up to 1986/87 show 562 reported cases of homosexuality (Tesfaye 1988). Against this backdrop, the school pupils involved in the study were asked about homosexuality and lesbianism. Their responses confirmed the cultural norm:

- **Homosexuality is not done in this country: it is practised in other countries and AIDS is sometimes said to have come from people who indulge in such practices.**
- **Such sex is done with hypodermic needles by injecting the male semen into the other’s body.**
- **Such sex used to be practised at the time of Noah and it is not clear to me how it is done but it is considered ‘catastrophic’ (meksefet) in our society.**
- **Such sex is obviously not done for reproduction and therefore unnecessary.**
- **Men usually have sex with other men during times of war when there aren’t any women within their reach.**

In one of the FGDs, one high school student claimed that he had never heard that women could have sex between themselves, although he had heard about homosexual men. He said that there are men who practise sex by ‘ointment’ (masho). He continued and said that the students attending the Islamic education system (musafaris) usually do it, and he had actually seen them doing it. The musafaris kidnap young boys and gag them so that they cannot cry out or shout for help. After that they tie the thighs of the boy together tightly and lubricate the inside part where the two thighs meet and then penetrate that as they would do to the vagina. He went on to note that they do it because they are isolated and are not allowed to come even close to women, let alone having sex with them. The same informant asserted that when he and his friends asked them what they were doing, the musafaris said “It was one way of making sure we don’t get HIV, a strategy even better than a one-to-one relationship”.

Other interviews with school pupils also revealed the existence of homosexuals in Dessie. Degafe was a 20-year-old male high school student. When asked if he knew anything about homosexual practices in Dessie, he responded that he heard about these but it was “a very disgusting and shameful activity”. Degafe appeared liberal in talking about other sexual matters, but this time, he was disgusted and ashamed.

> When we look at it from the perspective of religion and other things, it is unimportant and despicable. It deviates from God’s word since He created us to couple with the opposite sex. This problem may befall one by nature. It can also happen to a middle-aged person who has never dated a woman and since he is shy, he may begin this ‘dirty’ act with his intimate male friend.

He implied that homosexuality is unnatural and practised only by those who cannot obtain the favours of women. He, therefore, regarded the practice as innate but undignified, and unworthy of a man. Though he did not want to mention names, he said that he knew many such people in Dessie.

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61 Given that other more violent and serious crimes are not reported as much as they should be, the author argues that the figure may not be realistic as homosexuality is a sexual practice carried out secretly between consenting individuals. Therefore, the reported cases do not lead to the conclusion that homosexuality does not exist or is limited.
In the questionnaire, 44 percent and 55 percent of school pupils expressed agreement and disagreement respectively with the statement: "Homosexual practices hardly occur among young people in Dessie". The result implies that though most expressed extremely negative attitudes towards homosexuality in interviews, more than half of those who completed the questionnaire appeared familiar with its existence in Dessie town. Asked to comment on quantitative results the key informants believed that homosexuality is rare in Dessie and that the figures do not reflect reality.

Almost all the street youths involved in the study unanimously remarked that homosexuality is an abhorrent practice and they had never engaged in it. However, they recounted stories of other homosexuals who tried to abuse them or their friends. Amsalu is a 20-year-old shoe-shine boy around the Pizza. I asked him [have you heard about bushiti (gays) here in Dessie town?]

Yes, it is even said that it is widespread. Some of my friends confide it to me that; "This is a bushiti. This person practices sodomy, he has sexual intercourse in the anus. He has had sexual relations with males. He gets his ass polished". Unfortunately it happened to me once. A person came to where I polish shoes, and asked me to polish his shoes. After I finished the job, he invited me to lunch; we had lunch together. He invited me to tea and we had tea together. Then he told me that he would leave for Addis Ababa the next day. He claimed that he was a stranger, and asked me if I could see him off. I told him that I couldn't spend the night with him to see him off. He asked me up to what time I could be out in the evening. I told him that it is up to 9.00 pm. He said "Okay". In the evening he took me to a certain bar. He bought me beer. After we had drunk three bottles of beer, he said, "Let me show you my room" and we went into his room. He said, "This is where I will spend the night, so that I may not be far from the bus station". I sat down on the bed, and he began to rub my body and touch my hip. While talking to me, he kissed me on the cheek. When he rubbed my body, I recalled what was said. I had never suspected him, as he looked very gentle. His style of dressing made him appear like a man of high status. I was shocked, and couldn't open my mouth. Immediately I said, "Let me pass urine and I will come back" and left. He told me "We are going to have an additional drink". I said, "No, let me pass urine and I will come back" and I asked where the toilet was. Then I left and ran away. I was lucky.

I then asked him if he had more stories that he had heard from friends. He argued that street children around the place where he worked are ‘victims’. Bushiti people deceive children by providing food and clothes in exchange for sex. He went on to say that when he was in prison, he met two guys who said they had been arrested for being bushiti. He remarked that he has also heard about two males who live as a couple in Dessie. He contended that because of a fear of being arrested by the police, most of the time, homosexuals change their places of residence. They will stay in one place for about six months, and then they move on. When I asked him if he has ever heard of female-to-female sexual relations, he responded, "I haven’t heard of female-to-female relations. I think these women are to be found in other parts of the world. I don’t think they are in Ethiopia or in Dessie. I never heard about it".

Other street youth reported that there are street youths who trick newcomers to the street by promising to give them clothes and food. They mentioned a couple of street youths who have sex with any younger male children while they are sleeping on the street. They said that they use a towel and tie them up with when they try to cry for help. Tears misted his eyes while one street boy aged 16 recounted the story of another street boy being raped. He said that it was a quiet evening, and there was no one nearby. The boy was lying there and his clothes were torn around his bottom, and the rapist succeeded in having sexual intercourse. When the victim tried to scream, the rapist hissed, "Shut up, I will blow you off, you son of a bitch". The policeman who works for the child protection unit also told me a story of a street youth who was raped by a man when he went from the bus station to the perpetrator’s home carrying his luggage. The policeman, however, thought that homosexuality is rare in Dessie. When I hinted that people might not report it to the police because they were ashamed, he replied:

We couldn’t say we wouldn’t know about it if it had been widespread in society. We do know the day-to-day movements of the society in part. Therefore, I don't think this occurs widely. A warning is usually given so that it is not performed on the street. We provide education for the youth, telling them that it is
not necessary to perform the homosexual act because it will result in adverse consequences. If it were widespread, the children would have told us.

As mentioned above, those people involved in HIV/AIDS prevention also argued that homosexuality is rare in Dessie.

Drawing the facts all together, young people perceived heterosexuality as the norm, and other sexual orientations as abnormalities. In Ethiopia, it is embarrassing even to talk about homosexuality let alone confessing to having practised it. It is also a punishable sexual offence. Hence, young people's abhorrence of homosexuality is not a surprising finding. Given that anal and oral sexual activities are regarded as deviant sexual behaviours, their reaction to homosexual practices is rather to be expected. In a nutshell, they perceived hegemonic heterosexuality as natural, and normal. Just as most young street women were victims of 'group sex' or rape, it appears that street boys were also vulnerable to sexual exploitation (see also Mequanint 2004 for similar findings in Addis Ababa).

Conclusion

So far attempts have been made to present a picture of young people's sexual likes and dislikes. Efforts have been made to discover why they perceived certain sexual practices as 'normal' and others as 'abnormal', and 'risky options' without passing judgement on what they should or should not practise. Different reactions obtained from young people about different sexual practices and orientations imply that sex is not confined to a person's 'private life'; it takes place in the context of state and church, friends and local community (Woodhead 1997). There are norms, written or unwritten, which prescribe certain sexual practices and proscribe others. Such norms are partly or fully supported by the dominant institutions (print and electronic media, public discourse, sermons and policy statements from religious organizations). Young people used such norms as a frame of reference in describing their preferences.

Depending on the context they talked about, young people expressed their agreement or disagreement (open or pretended) with normative practices. In this light, sexual practices such as masturbation, homosexuality, anal and oral sex and such like - not considered to be 'right' or 'normal' by the dominant institutions and the society at large - are more likely to be concealed and denied by the participants. Vaginal intercourse is found to be the only appealing sexual practice simply because it is normative (Laumann et al. 1994). In most cases, the sexual behaviour of the parental generation is perceived as the yardstick and ideal standard for young people and hence 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexual behaviour is judged accordingly. It seems that attitudes to different sexual practices are guided by young people's perception of ideal norms but not by prevailing practices. This implies that although ideal norms may not necessarily reflect the behavioural reality on the ground, they exert a powerful influence in young people's discourse about sexuality, for they are tied to long-established social, cultural, and religious institutions and belief systems. Faced with a dilemma, young people in Dessie seemed to be struggling to reconcile ideal and actual norms of sexual behaviour (cf. Lucas 2001). Undoubtedly, because of the secrecy surrounding sex and sexuality that prevails in the society, young people in Dessie appear to have gathered scraps of vague information (floating in the air) about different sexual practices and orientations, and such fragmented knowledge has allowed them to create their own interpretations and constructions.

One of the common features of research on sexuality is the fundamental tension between what is said about sex publicly and what is done in private. It may be assumed that people's actual sexual lives do not necessarily correspond to their rhetoric. Laumann et al. (1994:543) writing about United States, for instance, reveal... "58 percent of people who said that premarital sex was always wrong had themselves had sex before marriage. Of those respondents who said that having sex as a teenager (ages fourteen to sixteen) was always wrong, 26 percent had engaged in intercourse before age seventeen". The authors argue that such a discrepancy between what is said and practised is not necessarily the result of the
hypothesis or insincerity of informants. It suggests rather that there is always the difference between what people do and what they say they do, especially in regard to highly private behaviors. The discrepancy between alleged and actual behavior is not limited only to sexual behavior, but also part of life including politics and religion (Laumann et al. 1994; Levy 1966 cited in Lucas 2001). It is reasonable to suspect that young people's discourse in Dessie was a public display, but their private behavior was different. Though not admitted in most cases, it appears that they have become knowledgeable by experiencing and exploring various forms of sexual practices. Since they perceived them as perverted behaviors, their discourse was full of inhibition and ambivalence.

Pertinently, in most cases, engaging in different sexual practices requires consent about the ensuing events by both partners. In addition to perceived 'harmful' effects and reference to the parental generation, which sexual practices are likely to be negotiated and enacted depends on many social dimensions of a relationship such as "the type of relationship in which the participants are engaged (be it a one-night stand, a long-term relationship, or a marriage), differences in social status between the parties and the social embeddedness of the relationship (the structure of social interest surrounding the sexual relationship)"(Laumann et al. 1994: 543-544). I must also add that women in Ethiopia are supposed to be passive during sex, and they would be considered 'outgoing' (extrovert/bold/daring) if they consented to unconventional positions. Both the young men and prostitutes explained that indulging in different sexual practices and erotic techniques other than those once conventionally accepted requires long-time familiarity and attachment.

For most street youths, their relationship with prostitutes is usually either short-lived or a one-night stand; there is also a possible social distance between street youths and their sex partners (prostitutes). Even if the young men want to engage in different sexual practices, it may be difficult to find willing partner with whom to experiment. Hence, the street youths' rejection of different sexual positions and anal and oral sex could be due to the fact that such sexual practices require a longer engagement in partnered sex and similarity in social status.62 The same explanation partly holds true for school pupils, as most of the relationships among students also do not last long (see Chapter Three).

It would seem that since they have been exposed to different sexual positions learned from pornographic films, both street youths and school pupils seem to have failed to distinguish sexual positions performed in a fantastical situation from those practiced in ordinary bedrooms. Further more, religion influences sexual discourse with its 'sacred' law that prescribes or proscribes a range of acceptable or unacceptable sexual behaviors and practices. It appears that the contradictory stance of young people can be attributed to religious 'sacred' laws that had influenced their discourse, if not actual sexual behaviour.

Given the feelings of rejection by females and society at large, and their limited resources (love, trust and money), group rape is a choice made by young men in general and street youths in particular. As discussed in Chapter Three, securing partners is not easy for street youths and other poor young people because of the growing consumerism. Under such circumstances, group rape is 'cost-effective' in satisfying their sexual desire. Scarcity imposed by limited resources and competition characterizes many personal sexual choices. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that socio-economic factors play a cogent role in shaping sexual practices (Laumann et al. 1994). The widespread prevalence of group rape among the street youths in this study also implies that for them sex is mainly for physical release and not an expression of intimacy or emotional attachment to someone they love. Group rape also partly shows how the absence of clear-cut life opportunities influences the way young people consider their positions and conduct themselves and view females. Their social and economic exclusion seems to have pushed them to sexual violence. Therefore, sexual values and norms that require consent and exclusive sex seemed to have been ignored, and sexual desire finds

62 As indicated in Chapter Three, the general public perceives street youths to be hoodlums, robbers, and thieves.
satisfaction in any available, and sometimes socially unacceptable, way. The impact of such sexual violence on the spread of HIV/AIDS needs further investigation.

Both multiple-partner sex and group rape highlight how deteriorating socio-economic conditions have disempowered young people and resulted in a lack of social values and self-esteem, and how these circumstances in turn have affected their sexual behavior. The frustrating situation that accompanies joblessness and inability to fulfil customary economic roles and obligations to win the hearts of women has led them to multi-partnered sex and group rape to boost their masculinity and self-esteem (Silberschmidt, 2001; see also Reysou, 2004). Silberschmidt (2001: 657-8, 665) argues,

> Multiple partnered sexual relationships and sexually aggressive behaviour seem to strengthen male identity and sense of masculinity. Strategies to improve sexual and reproductive health must take into account how socioeconomic changes have affected traditional gender roles and male sexual behaviour. Sexual behaviour patterns cannot be understood and dealt with unless the underlying reasons for such behaviours are analyzed... Possessing no means to change their economic status, many seem to be yielding to an exaggerated "owner"/macho behaviour and physical violence against women. Multiple partner sex may translate their economic subordination into a symbolic expression, which is perhaps culturally rewarding, if politically displaced.

Thus, Silberschmidt (2001:669) highlights that the rhetoric of empowering women and the discourse surrounding their rights is “[O]ften based on simplistic solutions to complex socio-economic problems”, and argues for the need to address the economic situation of young people (see Chapter Seven for further discussion of this issue).

It appears that many young people perceived masturbatory practices as a sexual 'sickness'. In this climate, “The proper outlet for semen release is thought to be sexual intercourse with a woman, not masturbation” (Lambert and Wood 2003:13). Though it is perceived as a sexual practice that generates many sexual and health problems, it is reasonable to assume that masturbation is common and unavoidable among young people. Since they are not taught that what they are doing is safe and healthy, even those who practise masturbation do it plagued with worries and uncertainties about their sexuality and moral character (Haddon 1982). Much of the anxiety and fear related to masturbation seems to have emanated from a lack of sex education and the stigma attached to sexual intercourse before marriage. Young people need to be told that masturbation is a healthy sexual practice that may help them steer clear of HIV/AIDS infection.

Homosexuality was perceived as a despicable sexual practice, even for those few who debated that they would not mind it if the opposite sexes had sex in whatever way it pleased them. The young people, therefore, unanimously regarded homosexuality with contempt and disgust. Attempting to conjecture homosexual practices or a person’s sexual orientation by simple observation is very difficult in Dessie/Ethiopia. It is allowed by custom, and is, indeed, usual, for boyfriends or girlfriends to embrace one another, to sleep together in the same bed, to walk entwined or arm-in arm or hugging each other. Young men and women (university graduates or otherwise) can rent a single room and sleep on the same bed to reduce living costs until they establish themselves. Ordinary greetings among men involve shaking hands along with hugging the waist. Rural people may in fact kiss on the lips as part of an ordinary but intimate greeting. This situation makes it very difficult to draw the line between pure ‘friendship’ and a homosexual relationship in an Ethiopian community such as Dessie. The discussion, however, highlights that homosexuality seems an emerging sexual orientation in Dessie and perhaps in the rest of the country.

When we compare school pupils and street youths, the latter uphold the general societal values and norms related to sexuality more strongly in the way they talk about sexuality. Relatively speaking, some of the students involved in the study advocated liberal ideas about sexuality. This is perhaps the effect of schooling, as education usually makes people believe

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61 It should also be noted that most of the street youths had taken part in fights or had been involved in other violent or illegal activities as accomplices (see Chapter Two). Therefore, violent sexual culture appears a reflection of their familiarity with more widespread violent activities.
in liberal ideas and values. “It is likely that the better educated have more secular views in general, have more liberal views of sexual activity in particular regardless of their religious affiliation, and are more likely to consider pleasure a major goal of sexual activity” (Laumann et al. 1994:84). The more restricted liberal attitudes expressed by school students (compared to those of the street youths) suggest how common perceptions of (in) appropriate sexual behavior are advocated and reinforced and the influence of socio-economic factors in shaping sexual behaviour (Laumann et al. 1994). The foregoing discussion also highlights that street youths in Dessie appeared to be more sexually experienced than school pupils, re-emphasizing how sex and sexuality are influenced by socio-economic conditions.

Taken together, in addition to providing socially desirable responses, young people expressed many misconceptions and a great deal of confusion surrounding different sexual practices and orientations. Such misconceptions seem to have important implications for designing sexuality and HIV/AIDS interventions. There is a need to understand that “...ignorance of sexual matters leads to pain and suffering, including unwanted pregnancies, to sexually transmitted diseases, to marital stress, conflict and divorce. It also may lead to the ignorance of each partner’s sexual desires and to the impossibility to enjoy sex” (Reysoo 2004:1). Reysoo’s observation points to the need of broader sex education.