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Sexuality in Southeast Asia: Exploring potentially harmful practices

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Abstract

The literature on HIV/AIDS in Africa has suggested that patterns of male circumcision and the practice of what has come to be termed “dry sex” are important determinants of the speed and scope of the spread of the epidemic. As the number of cases of HIV rise in Asia research is increasingly turning to questions of the prevalence and importance of potentially harmful sexual practices. Teams of social scientists associated with the ANU and funded by the Ford Foundation have recently found widespread use of various vaginal “drying” agents in Indonesia and Thailand, high prevalence of male and female circumcision in Indonesia, and near universal male circumcision in the Philippines, and indications of a growing use of surgical techniques for hymen restoration and vaginal tightening in Sumatra, Cambodia and Thailand. Colleagues in Myanmar have also reported vaginal modification practices. This reinforces earlier research on the traditional use of penile implants that has been modernized and spread through the region in recent decades. This paper presents a summary of these findings, and a discussion of health implications including the contributions these factors may make to the HIV epidemic.

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