

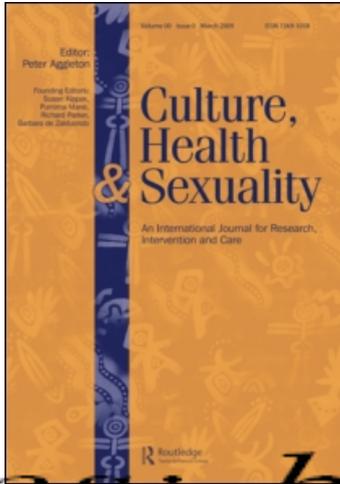
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The wisdom of whores: bureaucrats, brothels and the business of AIDS, by Elizabeth Pisani

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BOOK REVIEW

The wisdom of whores: bureaucrats, brothels and the business of AIDS, by Elizabeth Pisani, London, Granta Books, 2008, xvii + 372 pp., £8.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-84708-024-0

Elizabeth Pisani's book starts with a flourish. Her polished writing style lulls the reader into thinking it is a fun, modern autobiography, the tale of an 'accidental epidemiologist' who began life as a journalist and now does 'sex and drugs' for a living. She takes her reader gently, gently, from the student in the leather armchair in the wood-panelled library of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, to the young epidemiologist breezing through the corridors of Geneva in the hectic early days of UNAIDS, joining with eccentric colleagues to throw together those one-size-fits-all 'cookbooks' that are supposed to stop HIV in its tracks, all the way to . . . the slums and sewers of Jakarta and a new job with Family Health International, as a surveillance expert who has never actually done any surveillance, despite all those manuals she has compiled on the subject. The next thing the reader is learning is the multitude of ways that sex and drugs are done in the city's back-alleys and bars, beneath bridges and beside railway tracks and in the shadows of skyscrapers. Brothels vie for space and custom on an island in the middle of a foetid swamp, as music thumps all night from giant sound systems. Transgendered *waria* cruise the night streets in tight faux-leather skirts, fishnet stockings and the highest infection rate of any group in Indonesia. Long-haired boys file one after the other into the railway station toilet to shoot up heroin, using a shared needle placed just within reach on a high window-ledge.

So the scene is set for Pisani to start work, doing the qualitative research, preparing the surveys, prowling bar backrooms to collect blood and answers to questionnaires. Along the way, she learns that that there are so many ways that surveillance can go wrong. For example, what does a research programme do about a 'self-proclaimed heterosexual guy who has unpaid sex with a woman who sells sex to other men, while himself also selling sex to other men and buying it from transgendered sex workers'? It seems that fitting people into boxes, counting partners and tracking condom use is just not enough. And even more importantly, she learns to be honest about the mistakes, the questions that were not asked, the errors that nobody even imagined could be made – but were made.

If you think that is all a bit shocking, think again. That was only the velvet glove. Now comes the iron fist, as Pisani starts demolishing many of the sacred principles of HIV work. I thought I was broad-minded, snorted with the best of them at preposterous statements by political leaders and clerics and high-ranking public servants and even radical feminists, bleated to excess in support of human rights for all. But I recoiled in shock to learn that many of my own precious beliefs were threatened. HIV is fuelled by poverty and gender inequality? Test-and-no-tell creates stigma? Non-governmental organisations are better at outreach work than governments? Strong national leadership will save a country? Peers can connect best in outreach work? Think again, says Pisani.

It is true that the life-choices that people make are dictated by social and economic circumstances. Which comes first: the egg of HIV or the chicken of poverty? Blaming poverty may be a smokescreen, a way to help politicians avoid having to come to grips with the real issue: most people do sex and many do drugs. Leadership may take a country in the wrong direction, as politicians choose a largely ineffective quick-fix instead of an unpopular long-term sure result. Non-governmental organisations may do wonderful work, but with only a tiny proportion of the population, or may simply retreat into sewing-lesson and cake-baking mode and refuse to face any HIV reality at all. People may resent their peers asking them intimate questions and discussing intimate matters, preferring instead to talk about their personal lives to impersonal strangers.

Why, Pisani asks, can we not turn more information into less HIV? She answers herself: there is a huge gulf between the people who have the information and the people who act on it. Ideologies, politics, religions all join in to throw up roadblocks. It really is all about erections and injections, she insists, but who wants to admit that? How big a part does rationality play in sex or drug addiction? The realities just do not match the figures and projections in the PowerPoint presentations. Stigma can be reduced, behaviour changed and the tide turned if only everybody stops 'pussy-footing around', faces up to reality, jettisons priggish moral scruples and tells it like it is. That is what worked in Senegal and Uganda, she maintains, and it can work elsewhere too.

Just what sort of a book is this? Super cool autobiography with a twist of acerbity? Serious advice to epidemiologists soothed by a touch of pizzazz? The ultimate HIV survey manual for the twenty-first century? Confessions of a recovering epi-nerd? Evidence-based critique of the many misguided initiatives of the international HIV community? Or a lot of nonsense alleviated by a few true-life anecdotes?

This is a book about the AIDS industry: how to put the product together. How to sell it in a world of conflicting ideologies and big money to politicians and bureaucrats who become nervous at the mere suggestion that they might have to get involved; to religious leaders of all shades of belief and persuasion, who could find something to oppose in every piece of common-sense advice that the world's best scientists could muster. How to steer a cautious course through the rough seas of international agency bickering: 'It's a disease so it's ours' cries WHO. 'What about our turf?' clamour another half-dozen UN-somethings, and so UNAIDS was born. How to walk the tightrope between 'It's a disaster, so panic' and 'it's okay, we can stop it'. How to disentangle and then re-knot language, terminology and acronymy. How to 'beat-up' the data so that the politicians will worry but not flee, the purse-strings will loosen. How to persuade the religious Right that attention to AIDS will save innocent wives and their babies. How to 'do' surveillance instead of simply writing manuals on it.

Still, there is the 'disconnect'. Despite the confessions from Geneva, the fulminations about the cover-ups and beat-ups, this is still a book written by and for a public-health-above-all advocate. Why insist on confidentiality if it only sends out the wrong, stigma-loaded messages? If only everyone were open, she complains, there would be no more stigma and we can get on with the job. Yes, in our ideal world, that is how it should and would be. But the world is far less than ideal and while we are working, in our various ways, towards this end, we must ask ourselves: how many battered, tormented and tortured individual bodies must we ignore in order to heal our social body? How many, and how long, will it take?

The strength of this book is in its honesty. It reveals the uncertainties, the inadequately researched half-truths, the inadequately planned programmes of the international agencies, the infinite range of the sexual interaction of people that defies categorisation. In the end,

though, I think Pisani gets caught in her own trap. Back in her UNAIDS days, she bemoaned the fact that the schemes, the interventions, the programmes they dreamt up were all one-size-fits-all. After all those experiences in Indonesia, and all that she learned there, she seems to confound herself by saying: what I concluded there will fit all.

Ultimately though, it is a 'must-read' book. There is something in it to challenge and disturb anybody who has ever had anything to do with HIV/AIDS, something to make everybody angry, something to make everyone say: 'ah yes, of course'.

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