Reviewer's report

Title: Reductions in violence against female sex workers following a violence intervention programme in Karnataka state, South India: serial cross-sectional assessments

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Reviewer: Claudia Garcia Moreno

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Review by C Garcia-Moreno of Reductions in violence against female sex workers following a violence intervention programme in Karnataka state, South India: serial cross-sectional assessments'


BMC Public Health
Research article

Reviewer's report

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1. This paper fills an important gap in our knowledge about violence against female sex workers and interventions to address this. It describes the setting in which the research took place (Karnataka state in India), the rationale for the programme and the interventions undertaken. It then examines the impact of these interventions on violence itself and the associations between violence and condom use, HIV/STI rates and exposure to the HIV prevention programme components.

2. It would be useful to know when the violence intervention started. The paper states that the work on HIV overall started in 2003, but it is not clear when the violence component started. This is relevant particularly for understanding figure 1.

3. The methods are well described. The interventions are very comprehensive and it would have been interesting to consider different combinations of the different interventions, to assess if possible the contribution of the different components to the reduction of violence.

4. Regarding the sampling, it would be helpful to know a bit more about the PBS sampling. It refers to random selection from lists provided of "all FSWs contacted", but it is not clear on what basis FSWs are contacted and if this could introduce any potential bias in the sample.

5. The results are well presented. I have a few small queries:
a. In the second para under 'experience of violence in the past year and socio-demographic associations' which presents the factors associated with being beaten or raped, usual place of solicitation should be added as this also significant according to the table.

b. In table 2 one of the items is 'ever received "grey pack"' - would be useful to say what this is in a footnote.

C. Re age at first sex (years) if possible to disaggregate between 15-19, 19-24 and above, it would be useful to do this as this fits with categories used to define children (up to 18 years according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and young people.

d) Re condom use, it would useful to know if the data is available what proportion of FSWs actually used condoms with their regular partners since usually this is less than with their clients.

6. The discussion and conclusions are adequately supported and the limitations of the study are also acknowledged. Given that there was a wide ranging package of interventions, two important issues come to mind:

a) It would be useful to have some idea of the cost of the interventions. This is critical when trying to include some of these type of interventions in the AIDS Resources estimates.

b) It would be useful to flag in the discussion if there are any considerations regarding the different weighting for the various elements in the package of interventions. E.g. what is the role of having a crisis intervention response or police officer training (relatively short term) vs pursuing justice. Or in other words, are there some of the interventions that would seem more likely to have contributed to the reduction of violence.

This may be beyond the scope of this paper, but could perhaps be touched upon in the discussion.

7. The title addresses only part of the content (the reduction of violence following the intervention) but not the association of violence with STIs, lower condom use, higher condom breakage and less access to HIV prevention services which is an important part of this study as well. Perhaps something like 'Violence against female sex workers, its health impact and strategies to reduce it?' (Just a suggestion)

Level of interest
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This article is of great interest. Anecdotal and small scale qualitative research has highlighted violence against sex workers as an important impediment to the effectiveness of HIV prevention programmes among this group. Yet there is almost no empirical evidence on this issue. Furthermore, this article identifies promising interventions to address this issue. While there are limitations to the study (e.g. no control group), given the dearth of evidence and the urgent need
for programmes to address this, it is very welcome indeed.

Quality of written English
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The article is overall well and clearly written.
One sentence I found awkward is the one starting on page 7 "With the provision of…."
Would suggest splitting into 2 sentences and reordering to say: "The violence experienced by sex workers was considered a priority issue to address, along with the provision of sexual health education and services. The programme therefore created a framework to do so."

Statistical review
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It would be useful to expand the information on the weighting done and methodology used for this with a citation.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests'.