Author's response to reviews

Title: Experience of violence and adverse reproductive health outcomes, HIV risks among mobile female sex workers in India

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Response to Referees' Comments

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Title: Experience of violence and adverse reproductive health outcomes, HIV risks: a cross-sectional behavioural study among mobile female sex workers in India

Dear Ms Audrey Ann Reyes,

Thank you for the opportunity to revise our above-referenced paper and also forwarding the comments of the referee. We thank the referees for their comments, which have helped improve the quality of manuscript. The following letter gives our responses to the referee’s comments as requested in your letter of 06 April, 2011. With this submission, we have attached two copies of manuscripts: (1) manuscript with text highlighted in Yellow colour to show the major changes; (2) cleaned version of manuscript. The revised manuscript has been thoroughly edited for English. We have also formatted the manuscript according to the journal guidelines.

General comments of the reviewer:

The major strength of the study from which this manuscript was derived is its large sample size. The measures and methods of analysis of data collected are appropriate. However, there are some methodological and editorial issues that the authors need to address before the paper can be considered suitable for publication in BMC Public Health. The details of the areas that require revision are provided below;

Response: We have been more explicit in discussing methods and introduction sections and have changed the text wherever necessary to be more acceptable to the reviewer. These will be discussed in response to the reviewers' specific comments.

Specific comments by the reviewer:

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. I suggest a slight revision of the title to read 'Experience of violence and adverse reproductive health outcomes and HIV risks among mobile female sex workers in India'. This is a more suitable title of the paper

Response: We have corrected the title as per suggestions of the reviewer.
2. The whole of the background section needs to be re-written because there are many vague statements in it. For example, the first sentence in this section is difficult to understand. I suggest that the authors revise this to make it clearer. The authors stated that FSW ‘… face poor economic conditions back home’ (page 4). Where is home for the FSW? The authors also stated that ‘local community criminals and police perpetrate violence on FSW’. Who are these persons? Are criminals not expected to be in jail? If so how come they have access to FSW? Please clarify.

Response: The background section has been modified significantly to address the comments of the reviewer. We have given the details of the studies to be more precise and clear.

3. What do the authors mean by the statement that previous studies among FSW have ‘either being area specific or conducted at the micro-level’? Is the current study at the macro-level? Please clarify. The statement ‘additionally, far less is known about reproductive health risks…’ is not clear because it is incomplete.

Response: We have addressed these comments in the introduction section of the revised manuscript.

4. The authors stated that the study was conducted in four states in India with high prevalence rates of HIV but have given the figures that make these states high HIV prevalence areas.

Response: Data from the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) has been mentioned in the methods section to indicate the high HIV prevalence in study states.

5. There are many unclear statements in the section of methodology. For example, how many districts are actually in each state from which respondents were selected; what do the words ‘pockets’, ‘cruising points’ mean? The authors should keep in mind that BMC is read by an international audience, therefore local terms should be explained to enable a reader understand the meaning of local terms.

Response: The methods section has been carefully reviewed and edited to be more precise and clear on some of the local terms that were used. Necessary changes were made in the methods section of this revised manuscript.

6a. There is need to provide greater details about how FSW who work on the streets were actually interviewed. For example, where did the interview of this category of respondents actually took place on the street?. In which language (Hindi, English) was the interviews conducted?.

Response: Details for these questions are mentioned in the methods section of the revised manuscript.

6b. Why did the authors not use a uniform method of data collection: some interviews were recorded on PDA while data for others were through printed questionnaire? Could the use of these methods have introduced bias in the data collected? Please clarify
Response: While the use of different methods may have affected the responses to sensitive questions to different degrees; but we have no leads to believe that this was the case in this study. Moreover, all efforts were made in this study to insure the quality of data collected in case of both the methods. Text on the data quality control and management of the data are mentioned in greater detail in the revised manuscript.

7a. Why is verbal and not written informed consent obtained from the women?

Response: Since it was a behavioral research study among FSWs who are on the move, at the start of the study itself, we have decided not to collect any identification details of the participants. Knowing that study is not collecting any identifiers and there are no biological tests associated with the study, it was felt not necessary to take written consent from study participants. The procedures of the study design, tools and the consent forms were reviewed and approved by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of both Population Council and the University of Manitoba, Canada.

7b. Were the women compensated for their time in participating in the study? No. What was the appropriate duration of these interviews? 45 minutes. What have the authors done to care for the women who reported experience of violence, RTI and STI? In short, in what ways, if any, have the women involved in this study benefited from it?

Response: The text in methods section was revised to answer all these questions from the reviewer.

8. The results section needs some revision. It is pejorative to describe someone as ‘illiterate’; a suitable word would be someone without formal education. What does the word ‘destitute’ mean the way it was used in the results section. The statement ‘Among those who experienced violence episodes, sexual …’ is not clear because it is incomplete. The authors constructed three tables but reference is made to only Table 1 in the text. Please revise.

Response: We have addressed the comments of the reviewer in results of the revised manuscript. We have used "No Formal Education" instead of "Illiterates"; and also replaced the word 'destitute' with 'formerly married'. Mention of tables are made appropriately in the text.

9. The authors have acknowledged the limitations of their study. However one other limitation that must be pointed out is that data on RTI and STI may be under-estimates given the fact that these data were self-reported and that many women infected with STI actually do not have symptoms.

Response: We have added the suggestion in the limitations section of the revised manuscript.

Minor Essential Revisions

10. The authors may wish to review an important publication by Michael Koenig and colleagues on the relationship between violence and reproductive health outcomes published in Bulletin of the WHO, 2003, 81 (1): 53-60.
Response: The publication is referred in the introduction section of the revised manuscript.

11. The conclusion reads like a discussion of the implications of the results for reproductive health intervention and programming targeting FSW in India. I suggest that the authors provide fuller and more specific intervention activities that will address the problem of violence among FSW in India. A sub-section for conclusion should be created.

Response: Necessary changes are made in the revised manuscript.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

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