Reviewer’s report

Title: The success of an integrated approach at increasing safer sexual behavior among transgendered men in Laos: findings from a multi-round survey

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Reviewer: Clare Barrington

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The success of an integrated approach at increasing safer sexual behavior among transgendered men in Laos: findings from a multi-round survey

General comments:

This paper presents findings from the evaluation of an HIV prevention intervention with transgender persons in Laos. The paper addresses an understudied area within HIV prevention work and presents interesting and relevant findings for the field. The paper has three main limitations. First, there is a lack of clarity and consistency in the definition of the study population. Second, the paper lacks a clear definition of the argument the authors are making to guide the presentation of results. What is the story they are trying to tell with these data? This is not coming out sufficiently in the current form. Third, the paper would be strengthened by expanding the consideration of both empirical and theoretical insights to interpret the data. Please see comments below by section that will hopefully be useful to the authors in their revisions.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Definition of the study population:

The authors use the term “transgendered men”, which is not clearly defined and creates confusion in the interpretation of data. First, the term “transgender” generally appears to be the preferred term over “transgendered”. According to GLAAD, transgender should be used as an adjective, not a noun (i.e. transgender person, transgender individual). This is a debated topic but the term that appears to be considered the most respectable is “transgender” as an adjective used with “individual”, “person” or “people”.

The second point of confusion is the use of “men”. If the population is transgender, the authors should reconsider referring to it as “men”. Does this refer to male-to-female transgender persons? This should be clarified and used consistently.

It is also not clear what the authors mean on page 3 when they state: ‘On the basis of their biological behavior”. What does biological behavior mean?

Finally, on page 11 the authors use the term “Transgender MW” and “Transgendered MM”. The introduction of new terms adds further complexity to
the understanding of the study population. With regard to Transgender MM, defined as biological males who identify as female, but in appearance are male, who determines that their appearance is male? This requires further explanation if it is going to be used as a meaningful category of analysis.

2. Purpose of the paper

The purpose of the paper needs to be more clearly and succinctly stated in the introduction and needs to recognize the vulnerability and human rights of transgender persons in Laos, not just their potential as “bridges” in HIV transmission. The current introduction emphasizes the bridging role without discussing why we should care about transgender persons as human beings. Recognition of the stigma and discrimination experienced by this population is made on page 24 in the Conclusions section; the paper would be strengthened by incorporating this recognition into the introduction and using it to frame the significance of this work.

The Discussion section starts with 2 clearly stated objectives. These should be stated in the introduction as well and the methods should be revised to explain to the reader how the data presented responds to those two objectives.

The abstract should also be reviewed to clearly state the objectives and purpose of the paper (and perhaps to also be shortened, depending on journal specifications).

3. Background Section

Consider labeling this section “Introduction”.

Overall this section is long and requires revision to improve clarity and set-up the presentation of their data.

The authors may want to consider using sub-headings to organize the sections of the introduction to make it easier for the reader to follow.

As mentioned earlier, the social vulnerability of transgender persons needs to be recognized.

The description of previous studies with warias in Indonesia and transgender persons in Thailand is interesting but could be stated more succinctly. Page 4 includes substantial repetition.

The authors go back and forth between using the terms “transgender” and “MSM”. In general, it would seem appropriate to frame points made in the paper around “transgender persons” and identify data that used the broader MSM term only when needed. For example, on page 4 the paragraph “Inconsistent condom use and other risk sexual behavior among MSM have been associated with poor HIV knowledge…”.

It is somewhat confusing to include data from the current study in the background section. Consider dropping.
On page 5 the authors identify as a “major programmatic challenge” that many “Asian MSM” do not self-identify as gay or bisexual… Again, it would improve the clarity if the narrative focused on transgender persons. It is also not clear what the challenge is? The authors need to explain what specific challenges are created by the way men self-identify. How this impacts programming is not explicitly stated.

Page 6, consider dropping paragraph “Taken together…” to make the intro more succinct. It is overly descriptive and not clear what it contributes to the aim of the paper.

Page 6, the authors indicate that their literature review indicated only 1 intervention with a transgender target audience. This paper should be cited. The authors may also want to review Bockting et al 2005 and De Santis et al 2010 (and possibly others) for additional examples of evaluations of transgender interventions that could provide relevant insights for the current study. The paper would be strengthened by a more comprehensive review of the transgender HIV prevention intervention literature.

4. Methods
Theoretical Framework: while the authors indicate that the PSI framework is described in more detail elsewhere, it would aid in understanding their measures if they included a conceptual model/logic model for the current study, defining how they conceptualized and measured each construct (opportunity, ability, motivation).

Consider moving the description of the intervention to the Introduction section. It would also help to know how the intervention was designed. For example, what made them decide to use drop in centers? The authors should explain more how their formative work and other factors informed the intervention.

See earlier comments regarding the paragraph on page 11 classifying transgender participants at MM and MW.

Why do the authors think that their multi-item scales were not reliable? This should be discussed (or alternatively, drop discussion of multi-item scales).

Did the authors ask about participant involvement in sex work or transactional sex? This would be important to mention as many transgender populations have high levels of involvement in sex work and/or transactional sex, which is one of the main drivers of HIV vulnerability can heighten their vulnerability to HIV.

5. Results
Consider merging T1 and T2 together as they both present trend data pre-post.

Consider categorizing/summarizing socio-demographic variables for a more succinct presentation of data.

Consider only including narrative on significant differences (and just keeping
non-sig changes pre-post in the tables).

The Evaluation section is extremely long and would benefit from revision and cutting to read more like an article and less like a summary report. Referring back to the objective(s) to which this section responds may help to focus the presentation of data. One approach would be to simply list all changes that cannot be attributed to exposure to PSI and only elaborate on those that can be attributed. The authors have important and compelling data to present on how exposure was associated with HIV protective behaviors but the impact is lost in the length of the presentation. There appears to be enough rich findings to justify focusing on those that are most robust and significant.

6. Discussion
The discussion section requires more interpretation and contextualization of the data. In its current form, the Discussion includes extensive repetition of study findings that were already presented in the results narrative and tables without sufficient interpretation of those findings. The authors do not cite literature (empirical or theoretical) to interpret their data, which is a major limitation of the paper.

The inclusion of data not shown on page 20 should be reviewed – these seem like potentially interesting findings that could be included in the paper?

7. Conclusion
Would be stronger as a 1 paragraph summary of most relevant findings and implications.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests