Reviewer’s report

Title: Increasing safer sexual behavior among male-to-female transgenders in Laos through an integrated social marketing approach

Version: 2 Date: 31 August 2011

Reviewer: Clare Barrington

Reviewer’s report:

Overall the paper is much improved and clearer. The authors have done a very nice job tightening up the writing, though I would suggest another round of editing to try and make things even more succinct as the paper continues to read very long. There are a few areas where the paper would still benefit from further revision that I will summarize below:

Major compulsory:

1. While the authors have revised the use of language to describe the study population, it is still challenging for the reader. I do not agree with the decision to drop use of Kathoy as it is moving us farther away from the study population and does not add clarity to the understanding of the study pop. If the paper is about Lao Kathoy, this term should be defined at the very beginning (as the authors have done) and used throughout. It is the most appropriate term as it is the one used by the participants themselves.

2. When citing other studies or referring to the study pop, it is preferable to use “transgender persons” rather than “transgenders”. The authors should review a recent (2011) paper by Nemoto et al in AIDS Care for an example of language use around both transgender and specifically Thai Kathoey populations that may help.

3. The authors state that they did not delve more into commercial/transactional sex because it was not a focus of the study based on formative work that indicated the pop did not identify as sex workers. As many transgender populations in other settings have high rates of involvement in commercial and transactional sex due to the fact that they have no other opportunities for employment, it would greatly strengthen the paper to explain why that is not the case in this setting. If the authors collected any data on the dynamics between partners or exchange, it should be added into the paper.

4. The authors indicate that they have not cited more literature on transgender persons and HIV in the introduction because it does not come from the same region where they conducted this study. There seem to be a few studies not cited on transgender populations from Southeast Asia that have not been cited (for ex, the Nemoto paper mentioned above). While I agree that it is not relevant to try and “generalize” from US-based transgender populations to other settings, these previous studies provide the limited empirical and theoretical foundation for research with these populations that can help to frame the context of the study.
This does not mean that the authors need to extrapolate or generalize from these studies to their own, or vice versa. What the study lacks is a more thorough conceptualization of the context surrounding HIV vulnerability and transgender populations in the introduction to describe why Lao kathoy seem to have disproportionately high rates of HIV compared to the “general population”. This needs to go beyond describing condom use and individual knowledge to describing the context in which kathoy live (for ex, legal context, work and livelihood opps). This contextual information is critical for the reader to understand the disparity that the authors use as a motivation for the study. Additionally, the experience of katoy in Laos should be further described not just as a “programmatic challenge” but rather to help the reader understand their experience in this cultural setting.

5. The discussion still requires a deeper interpretation of data from this study, and others, rather than just comparing findings. The authors should consider why in this setting they found what they found and strengthen the link between these findings to their consideration of implications. This relates back to the need for a greater contextual understanding of the Lao Kathoy experience in the intro. The discussion also includes too much description of the intervention – this could be dropped to tighten the paper and/or allow more space for richer interpretation.

Minor essential

6. I would suggest dropping the footnote stating that the paper will not cite studies not from Asia. I am not compelled by the argument and I also think that comparing Laos to Bangladesh, for ex, is as much a stretch as comparing to other countries. Additionally, the paragraph on pages 6-7 that starts off describing “little research” being available stands out. This sentence should either be revised and expanded or dropped. It does not help to make their argument any clearer.

7. I would also suggest stating the study objectives in this paragraph rather than waiting until the end of the next section.

8. There is some confusion between the objectives of the study and the objectives of the program. It would help to avoid stating these together in the same paragraph. The goals of the program can be addressed in the descriptions of the program activities.

9. I would suggest dropping references to “data not shown” from the discussion. These data should either be reported in results or dropped.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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.