Reviewer’s report

Title: Characterizing the sexual life-course of women prior to self-reported entry into sex work in south India from a cross-sectional survey: implications for STI/HIV prevention programming

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Reviewer: Tanvi Rai

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Summary of the paper

This is a very interesting paper retrospectively exploring the vulnerabilities of sexually-active women to HIV/STI before they identify themselves as ‘sex workers’. Although a cross-sectional study design does not lend itself very well to examining behaviour over a prolonged period of time, using significant events in the respondent’s own life as a memory aid helps to punctuate their sexual history in a way that would make it easier for them to recall. The purpose of the exercise is to uncover possible reasons for why female sex workers in Karnataka seem to be at risk of HIV so early in their sex work career, the implication being that perhaps they maintain high-risk sexual behaviour for a few years before they formally become members of that group. It is this ‘transition period’ (from first sex to self-identification as a sex worker) that the study focusses on, looking at what happens during it, and how its length is determined by what happens during it. The comparison between devadasi and non-devadasis is very interesting because it seems for the former the move from first sex act to becoming a sex worker is more predictable (even if the transition period shows variability), while for the latter, it is difficult to say, except retrospectively from the point when they have indeed become sex workers, whether their behaviour was going to lead to official sex work.

Discretionary revisions

1. Introduction: Would be useful to have some background (as sentence or two) about devadasis vs non-devadasis: things such as – their relative distribution in the area, what determines whether a sex worker is a devadasi or not (e.g. are you born into it?) and how definite is it that a devadasi young adolescent will enter sex work?

2. Page 3, 1st paragraph, 2nd last line: Since this introductory paragraph is about the whole of India, it would be good to include references to intervention programmes that are from a different region and not just those administered by KHPT.

3. Page 3, 2nd paragraph: A clearly stated definition of the ‘transition period’ would be useful so that the reader can access it easily. Something like, “In this paper, we define the transition period to be ....”

4. Page 3, 3rd paragraph, 5th line: Not entirely clear why “an older man who is
able to pay large sums of money” makes him high-risk for HIV. Is that because he often ‘does’ first night ceremonies, or is an active client of FSWs?

5. Page 3, 3rd paragraph, 5th line: Sentence says: “Secondly, FSWs may not identify as sex workers until well after they first receive money or gifts...”. This suggests too much pre-determination, and it would read better to say: “Secondly, women may not identify themselves as sex workers well after....”

6. Page 4, 2nd paragraph, line 4: Would be good to have a sentence about this other study whose methods this one is based on, especially as it is in a different geographical context.

7. Methods, Page 5, 1st paragraph, line 5: How is ‘client’ defined? Defined by the respondent? An explanation would be useful.

8. Page 5, 1st paragraph, line 9: The migration profiles are unclear, for instance, migrant FSWs practice sex work outside their home district for >2 weeks/year – where do they (do they?) practice sex work for the rest of the year? And in contrast, do the local FSWs practice all year?

9. Page 5, 2nd paragraph, line 3: “These key events reflect the major transitions among sexually active women, but were modified...”. Since the stages are only true for sex workers, not all sexually active women, might be better to say something like: “These key events are similar to major transitions among sexually active women but were modified..”.

10. Results, Page 7, Sexual behaviour during transition period, line 2: No need to refer again to the previous study on which methods based.

11. Page 7, comparing 1st para, last sentence AND 2nd paragraph, last sentence: I find these two sentences a bit confusing, might need some clarification. It seems devadasis who had long-term partnerships with first sexual partners were less likely to recall 1st sex act as commercial, but among FSWs that did recall 1st sex as commercial (the majority of whom are devadasis), nearly half (45.9%) did have a long term partnership with 1st sexual partner, while the other half did not. Both these statements may be true, but it would just help to describe this relationship more clearly.

12. Page 7, 3rd para, 2nd last sentence: Within the subgroup of those who had a commercial 1st sex act, although the average difference, between those with and without a long-term partner, in the transition period is 3.9 years, these differences are quite different for devadasis and non-devadasis (where there is hardly any difference, figure 2) and I wonder why they are being clubbed together in the results?

13. Page 8, Discussion: This describes the relative significance of the variables that were examined in this study well, but it would benefit from more discussion about other variables that might be important in shaping the lifecourse of the respondents, but may not be about sexual behaviour – such as changing levels of domestic responsibilities, financial security, the presence of young children and so on. Especially because only 266 (204 devadasis, and 62 non-devadasis) said they had a commercial 1st sex act so the majority did not have this event that, perhaps unfairly, suggests a bias that predicts their eventual entry into sex
work.

14. Discussion: I wonder if using ‘age at…’ as the way to recall menarche, 1st sex, 1st commercial sex etc. is prone to errors by respondents, especially given that the majority are illiterate. In my own research in North India, I found people struggling to remember/report their current age, let alone their ages when events happened in the past! If the situation is similar here, it may be worth a specific mention in potential recall bias.

15. Discussion: Sex workers who become HIV-aware have been seen to improve their consistent condom use with clients/occasional partners, but continue in their low condom use with regular, trusted partners – this is known from the existing literature. What this study is adding is that the same kind of risk from regular partners exists at a time when they do not consider themselves to be sex workers (since only a minority had occasional partners in the transition period, with the median number of these partners being 1) – this should be made more explicit. And this risk during the transition period for sex workers should be compared analytically to women who do not become sex workers but are still potentially at risk because of their regular partners being high-risk.

16. Table 1: How old are the oldest FSWs? Will be good to know how far back they were having to remember to recall their 1st sex act, and their sexual history in the interim until becoming sex workers <=5 years before the study.

17. Figures 1 and 2: Nice way to demonstrate sexual life histories – visually appealing and easy to understand.

Minor essential revisions
1. Page 6, Results, Study Population, line 2-3: The numbers (332, 507, 171) only add up to 1010.
2. Page 9, 1st para, line 9: There is a superscript ‘3’ without a corresponding footnote.

Major essential revisions
None.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.