Reviewer's report

Title: Perceived control over condom use among sex workers in Madagascar: a cohort study

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Reviewer: Laura Murray

Reviewer's report:

First, my congratulations to the authors. This article makes an important contribution to the literature on condom use and female sex work. Perhaps its most important finding is sex workers’ increased vulnerability with their main partners as opposed to clients, which has important policy implications in thinking about how to structure HIV/STI prevention interventions. The methods are appropriate and generally well described. It presents its analysis in a clear, well-written and straightforward way and if the following issues are addressed, I would recommend publication.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. One issue I found a little confusing was the authors’ criteria for defining who were clients and sex workers. My suggestion is to more clearly define both terms and how the project knew that the women were sex workers and the men who were not “husbands/boyfriends” were clients. The demographic data support this hypothesis, yet it is unusual to see a study that considers the women as sex workers yet does not include “trading sex for money or material goods in the past X amount of time” as a criteria for participation and fitting this definition. It would be great if the authors could address this issue in the text, perhaps either through more contextual information about sex work in Madagascar or even citing other studies that have used a similar criteria if they exist.

2. The stated objective of the study is to “describe baseline indicators of condom use control by type of sex partners”, yet the authors include some data from the follow-up surveys, even through their dependent variable was not measured at follow-up. This creates some confusion. I would suggest taking out the follow-up study part and focusing the text exclusively on the baseline data findings regarding perceived control over condom use and condom use (and therefore revise the title as well). If the authors feel strongly about leaving in the follow-up data, I would suggest comparing the follow-up data more clearly to the baseline data (perhaps in a separate section of the results).

3. One limitation is the basis of comparison between the perceived control variables of whether anyone had ever refused to use a condom or become angry when condom use was suggested. For the clients, the question only referred to the last client as opposed to “ever” for a main partner. It would seem that a sex worker would perhaps be more reticent to negotiate condom use with a client if
other past clients (not necessarily the last one) had ever refused or become angry with them for insisting on condom use. Could the authors please address this and explain why they chose to make this distinction for these two questions specifically?

4. It may be helpful if the authors engage a little more with issues surrounding gender. For example, could the authors include a little more information about how and why they chose these proxies for “gender-power”? It seems that it may not be exclusively related to condom negotiation and of course could be reflected in other areas of the women’s lives as well. I realize that this is outside the scope of the article, but it may be worth adding a sentence or two in the discussion or limitations about how this study measures a very specific aspect of gender-power, but recognizes that there are other measures of gender power that would be important to take into account (for example, who supports the household financially, etc.).

5. In Table 1, of perceived control over condom use, it would be helpful if the authors indicate if the differences between main partners and clients was significant or not.

6. In this same table, it would be helpful if the authors included all of the frequencies for perceived condom use control in Table 1.

Discretionary Revisions

1. As someone less familiar with the country, I would have found it helpful to have more contextual information about sex work is in Madagascar, previous research conducted there, and again, how the authors were able to assume that all of the women interviewed were sex workers. I would specifically suggest the work of Kimberly Stoebenau.

2. I would suggest including a few sentences about the studies cited in the text and more clearly elucidate what the studies left out and what these findings hope to show.

3. The introduction and the discussion could also be strengthened with the inclusion of more studies about the influence of gender on safer sex behavior in other contexts.

4. Did the authors look at the relationship between the variables included in the perceived control measurements? For example, the finding that unprotected sex was not significantly associated with their main partner ever becoming angry or even violent when asked to use a condom as opposed to being significantly associated with the main partner ever refusing to use a condom is surprising and made me question if there was any relationship between the variables (i.e., if the women who reported a violent reaction to condom use also reported main partner refusing to use a condom).

5. Finally, on page 10, it would be great if the authors could include the data about the difference in condom use between regular and non-regular clients. This
data, along with the increased vulnerability with main partners would seem to indicate that intimacy is also a factor in negotiating condom use.

**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.