Reviewer's report

Title: Care seeking behaviour and barriers to accessing services for sexually transmitted infections among female sex workers in Laos

Version: 2 Date: 6 September 2011

Reviewer: Anh Ngo

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General comments

The paper attempts to address health seeking behaviours and barriers to accessing available STIs services among female sex workers (FSWs) in Laos. However, the method appears weak with a lot of deficiencies in measurement of these 2 central “constructs” under the study. The examination of barriers is insufficient. For example, it is unusual that the study did not explore the role of stigma towards sex work as a barrier to services. Discussion is unfocused with some irrelevant to the findings and without liking to current interventions that promote STIs services use among FSWs in the study location. Recommendations are too general without specific intervention and policy implications. Because the method is weak, so it is difficult to draw any strong conclusion or implication for intervention strategies from the data. See specific comments below:

Major compulsory revisions

Background

There is a lack of background information on social and political contexts of sex work such as types or legal status of sex work, stigma associated with being a sex worker in Laos. These all have important implications for accessing healthcare services among FSWs.

Methods

Study area

While the authors provided a detailed description of services available to FSWs in the study areas (e.g., drop-in centre), there is a lack information on whether these services were used by intended clients or not.

As all participants were recruited from entertainment venues, it is unclear that how they were identified to be current/former sex workers and whether all of them sell sex or only a proportion of them engage in the sex industry. Why direct sex workers (e.g., street-based or brothel based) were not included in the study?
Data collection procedure

How health seeking behaviours and barriers to services were conceptualized and operationalized, and what are questionnaire items used to measure these variables? Why stigma was not mentioned as a potential barrier.

Analyses

What are dependent and dependent variables and how they were defined in the logistic model?

Results

Barriers to RTI/STI services (paragraph 1, page 11)

Similar problem was seen with barriers to services (i.e., life time experience or most recent visit). For those who already visited a health facility, it is inappropriate to ask them about the barriers; instead they should be asked to judge the quality of services rendered and whether they will return or recommend other to the service. It is surprising that women who did and did not visit any health facility were asked using similar questions regarding barriers, and there is no question enquiring about the effectiveness of treatment.

What is the role of the owner or pimp in women’s access to healthcare services?

Discussion

As noted above, discussion should be more focused and in line with current interventions that promote health seeking behaviours and service use among FSWs in the study locations. Some statements made in the discussion are not backed up fully by the data presented (e.g., violation of human rights, costs of treatment).

Paragraph 2, page 13: While the authors stated that the location of drop-in centres inside a public hospital may not be convenient for women to visit due to a concern of being seen by others. However, compared to other health facilities, drop-in centres were used by the highest proportion of women in the study. No discussion on whether this type of intervention should be continued or any adjustments should be made.

Paragraph 3 page 13: The authors listed all barriers without highlighting the most common/important barrier(s) as not all women faced these barriers to the same degree. For example, any differences in reported barriers by women who did and did not seek care and what are implications for intervention.

Minor essential revisions

Care seeking behaviour for RTI/STI symptom (paragraph 3, page 10) The author stated that women used a range of health care facilities, but no information on the contexts of their use (e.g., in their most recent visit, most recent episode of symptoms, or their life time experience) was provided. Any women reported
visiting more than one health facilities in the most recent episode of their illness? If so, the sum of responses should be more than 100%.

Table 3

What does “the last time” refer to? The last time of illness or the last visit to a healthcare facility?

Manuscript need to be checked for English grammar and expression.

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

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**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'