Reviewer's report

Title: Falling through the cracks: a qualitative study of HIV risks among women who use drugs and alcohol in Northeast India

Version: 1 Date: 18 October 2012

Reviewer: Jean Schensul

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Compulsory revisions

1. A more thorough review of the literature on alcohol and HIV in India in general and as related to women (see AIDS and Behavior supplemental issue 2010 and other examples).

2. Clearer differentiation of each of the states in the description and analysis (context is important) and explanation as to similarities and differences.

3. Clearer discussion of the three groups of users: drugs only, alcohol only and both. How are these three groups differentiated; does it matter.

A better explication of why illegal alcohol use, versus illegal drug use should make a difference in accessing services and treatment. Why is one type of use stigmatized more than the other in each of these locations.

One of the strengths of the paper is its ability to compare and contrast alcohol use and drug use in populations that use one or the other, or both, in settings in which one or both are stigmatized. The paper should highlight these differences.

The use of alcohol and drug use (or both) and HIV exposure in the northeastern states is very important to understand, especially in the context of widespread commercial drug trade and transactions. Describing and analyzing how alcohol plays into this setting and how each of these types of substances comes to the fore depending on the context are the potential strengths of the paper. But these comparisons are not made systematically throughout. A revised version of the paper that does comparative analysis of both context (policy), context (norms through KIs) and use (through users) would be very useful. Authors are encouraged to rethink and reapply.

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.