Reviewer's report

Title: Sexual Behavior and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Seasonal Migrant Laborers in Metema District, Northwest Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study.

Version: 3 Date: 14 July 2014

Reviewer: Jennifer Hirsch

Reviewer's report:

The authors of this manuscript conducted a survey to assess vulnerability to HIV among migrant agricultural workers in Ethiopia. As they note, there is a well-documented association between labor migration and vulnerability to HIV. The methods are appropriate inasmuch as the stated goal is to assess individual-level risk practices.

Major compulsory revisions: The article would be greatly strengthened if the authors considered how the survey findings are relevant conceptually in relation to the broader literature on HIV and migration. In other words, if all that they do here is document behavioral vulnerability to HIV for migrants in Ethiopia, then it is not entirely clear why this would be of interest to the broader public health research community, though clearly this is a finding that is important from a policy and practice point of view.

A good start might be ground the paper more thoroughly in the substantial literature on HIV and migration. One important reference is Weine and Kashuba's (Weine & Kashuba, 2012). Other authors whose work has been important in the Sub-Saharan African context include Campbell (Campbell, 1997) and Lurie (M. N. Lurie, 2006; M. Lurie et al., 2003). Another one I particularly like because of how it lays out the conceptual pieces is Albarran and Nyamathi (Albarran & Nyamathi, 2011). In all of this, what the authors should consider is how their work in Ethiopia contributes to/challenges/differs from what has been found elsewhere. It's not so useful to compare just the prevalences of various practices in different contexts, particularly contexts as diverse as India, North Carolina, California, or Croatia, as the authors do; what would be more useful would be to discuss how the determinants of vulnerability might differ in the Ethiopian context from those discussed elsewhere (that is, to look at this problem a bit more abstractly and less conceptually). The fact that HIV and migration has not previously been studied in Ethiopia is not, by itself, significant enough to raise this work to the level of being of general interest.

A key conceptual area in which the paper could be stronger is that it focuses heavily on individual behavior, and recommends prevention approaches which have not generally been effective at bending the curve of the epidemic.

• For example, they define vulnerability in relation to workers and communities, but then provide little information about the communities – nothing about the organization of sex work, availability of condoms, the conditions of housing,
access to forms of entertainment other than purchased sex, or the working conditions, all of which would be relevant to understanding community capacity to respond to these findings as well as the social determinants of vulnerability.

- The findings that men who have received HIV education are more likely to report using condoms may just mean that they are more likely to know that the person administering the survey wants them to have used condoms.
- IEC to effect behavioral change has not generally by itself had a substantial or enduring impact on behavior.
- The recommendation for targeted prevention and interventions at migrant workers’ destinations and farm sites needs to take into account key stakeholders – who are the owners of these farms?
- The recommendation for promotion of testing at departure and return could lead to some fairly draconian ways of treating labor migrants, who are already quite vulnerable, and the notion of promoting condom use with main partners fails to take into account the fact that almost everywhere people are quite reluctant to use condoms with main partners because it is tantamount to confessing having had other partners.

Overall, authors might consider focusing more on the context of migration – perhaps not in this work, but as they develop this line of research. The association between labor migration and HIV reflects the underlying social vulnerability of migrant laborers, but that is not an inevitable characteristic of migration - it is produced by specific social and economic policies, and could potentially be modified.

One particularly interesting element of the findings was the relation between length of stay on the farm and condom use. There is work elsewhere about loneliness and vulnerability to HIV among labor migrants (Hirsch, Muñoz-Laboy, Nyhus, Yount, & Bauermeister, 2009; Parrado, Flippen, & McQuiston, 2004) and so in a future version of the paper the authors may wish to particularly explore that finding, which clearly lends itself to community-level prevention approaches in terms of thinking about ways in which the context of migration could be transformed to provide more social support.

Here are the citations of the readings mentioned above


**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

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

**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.