Reviewer's report

Title: Competition is not necessarily a barrier to community mobilisation among sex workers: A mixed method intervention planning assessment from Zimbabwe

Version: 2
Date: 30 March 2015

Reviewer: Monica Biradavolu

Reviewer's report:

The paper makes a simple but very important point: just because sex workers work in a highly competitive (and sometimes combative) environment does not mean that there is no cooperation, friendship and mutual support. The fact of competition must not preclude interventions from using community mobilization strategies. Rather, the data presented highlights very well that interventions must understand the complexity and totality of sex workers' lives that includes the duality of cooperation/competition, trust/mistrust etc., and, devise programs accordingly.

The paper is well written, flows well, and the findings are well-supported by the data. The use of survey findings with the qualitative data works well.

The objective of the comments below is to strengthen the paper further.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. The review of literature shows that the verdict is not yet final on whether it is possible, or effective, to implement community mobilization strategies for HIV prevention among female sex workers. While this is a good point, it should not be overstated. Some of the referenced literature where such strategies did not work is somewhat dated: from 1996 [Asthana and Oostvogels], 2000 [Campbell et al.] and 2001 [Wojcicki et al.]. At minimum, the paper should balance this out by more recent literature that deepens our understanding of how community mobilization strategies for sex workers reduce HIV risk factors: e.g., see Blankenship et al 2008, AIDS; Erausquin et al 2012, Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health; Erausquin et al 2014, AIDS & Behavior etc.

2. Following from above, I urge the authors to consider more fully the literature on community mobilization efforts for HIV prevention. Just as an example, from the work in India, both Sonagachi and the Avahan program are mentioned but in too cursory a manner. My interest in making this point is to ensure that there is greater cross-cutting understanding of the very many similar efforts underway across the world. Since Avahan explicitly used a community mobilization strategy across 116 NGOs in 83 districts in 6 highest-affected states in India, it is important to provide a more substantial review of the findings from that effort than is currently the case in the literature review. See Wheeler et al. in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health 2012 for a detailed description of the program, and the citations therein.
3. From lines 97-100: Either the sentence or the reference is not correct: “Similarly, early efforts to replicate Calcutta’s successful Sonagachi model in Mumbai…” – the reference cites the Asthana and Oostvogels paper but the data from the cited paper is not from an intervention in Mumbai, but from an intervention in Madras, and this intervention did not use the Sonagachi model.

4. Can the authors provide some information on the three sites? What type of settings are these – urban/rural, types of sex work conducted etc.? They are written up as though they are the same - is this the case? What are the differences, if any? If there is space constraint, perhaps this could be in the discussion section? If we are to pay attention to local context, this seems an important point to highlight.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. No mention of limitations

Discretionary Revisions

1. It would be useful for readers to read a sentence or two about how the use of mixed methods enhanced the understanding of sex workers’ lives and helped devise relevant mobilization strategies. Would it be correct to say that the qualitative findings played a role in the decision not to focus on the aspect of competition in the meetings (mentioned in the Discussion section) and instead solely highlight the cooperative aspects? If so, it is worth pointing this out in the Discussion section.

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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