Author’s response to reviews

Title: Experiences of gender-based violence among female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and transgender women in Latin America and the Caribbean: a qualitative study to inform HIV programming

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Author’s response to reviews:
Dear reviewers,

Thank you very much for your careful comments on this paper; they were very helpful in clarifying the issues that needed to be addressed and strengthening the paper. Please find an extensively revised manuscript and detailed responses to your questions below.

Best,

Emily Evens

Reviewer 1

1) Abstract and introduction are adequate.

2) Sample: This is a very interesting and diverse sample. Although the diversity of the sample could be a strength of the study, it could also be a limitation. What was the rationale for the various sites included? How did the author arrive at the current sample size? It might be helpful to provide a sample size calculation.

The study sites were selected by LINKAGES and UNDP using two criteria: 1) the presence of local KP networks interested in this work, and 2) interest in addressing GBV among KP groups from the government, civil society, United Nations (UN), and USAID Washington and USAID country missions. In Haiti, three cities were included because they represented potentially different risk environments for KPs and additional funding was available. These has been clarified in the manuscript.

Sample size were calculated based on existing qualitative norms and research on the number of qualitative interviews required to achieve saturation—the point at which no new information becomes available when additional interviews are added—typically 12 interviews. Fifteen interviews were conducted for FSWs and transgender women in each study setting (Trinidad and Tobago/Barbados, El Salvador and each Haiti site). As MSM were expected to be a more socio-economically diverse group, 20 interviews were conducted in each site. This has been added to the manuscript.

3) Method: The authors report that this is a mixed methods study. What specific mixed method design was used? What was the timing of data collection (quant, qual--when were these data
collected). From the appearance of the manuscript, I am not that is truly was a mixed method design. The authors need to state the study design used.

Thank you for this important comment, the approach and the sample size were qualitative however, the interview guide was semi-structured and included both closed-ended questions asked of all participants regarding their experiences of violence that yielded percentages of participants experiencing different types of violence and open ended-questions that yielded qualitative text. Both the closed- and open-ended questions were asked during the same interview. This has been clarified in the text and the manuscript title and should help reduce confusion as to the study design.

4) Results: How were the qualitative data analyzed? Were there any methods of rigor employed to ensure that the data were interpreted without bias? If this was not done, it might constitute a fatal flaw in the study.

Rigorous qualitative methods were used and reported previously on pages 8 and 9; these have been clarified to describe the methods typically used to ensure rigorous analysis including: a multi-person analysis team, use of a qualitative software program, assessment of inter-coder reliability and reporting results with participants and in-country stakeholders to ensure appropriate interpretation. The revised text is below:

Interview data from Barbados, Trinidad and El Salvador were coded by a team of six researchers at FHI 360 using QSR NVivo qualitative data analysis software program. The researchers developed a detailed codebook, including deductive codes generated from the data collection instruments and inductive codes emerging from the data. For each country, teams of analysts independently coded transcripts and resolved discrepancies through discussion until inter-coder agreement was achieved. After that, inter-coder agreement was assessed periodically. Overall, 20% of transcripts were coded by a team of analysts to assess agreement. Following analysis of qualitative data from the three other countries, qualitative results from open-ended sections of interviews conducted in Haiti were coded using a structural matrix, as these interviews were shorter and provided fewer details. The analysts ran code reports and reduced and organized the data into themes, including supporting quotes. Data was organized to identify the settings where violence occurred, the type of violence (emotional, physical, sexual, economic and other human rights violations), and perpetrators of violence. The data were summarized separately for FSWs, MSM, and transgender women, and then summarized across study participant groups.

5) Results: Because of the diversity of the sample, why didn't the authors do some comparisons among the various sites and populations?
Overall results show high levels of violence among all populations and study sites. We have added descriptions of findings where they are notably different between groups or settings including: participant demographics, settings for violence, types of violence and perpetrators.

6) There are too many tables in the manuscript. The reader gets overwhelmed by the amount of data presented.

Thank you for this very helpful feedback; we have removed all tables except for a revised Table 1 showing participant demographics. Key results from other tables have been described narratively in order not to place undue emphasis on quantitative results when the study design and sample were qualitative.

However, the manuscript needs to be organised better to make it easy to read and understand. So the results section and the discussion section should be rewritten.

We have substantively revised the results section (see below in comments from Reviewer 2) structuring it in two sections, the first describes the settings where violence took place, the types of violence and the perpetrators and the second provides results on the consequences of violence, disclosure, service seeking behavior, services wanted and perceptions of HIV risk. Additionally, the discussion section has been strengthened to add clearer analysis and recommendations emerging from the results.

Reviewer 2

Specific comments:

1. The authors have not done a good job of explaining why their manuscript is important. What is new in their manuscript? There have been many published articles on violence and KPs, so what new information does this manuscript add. This will be important to specify in the beginning. If there is nothing new and this study confirms what other studies have found (which is also important) then the discussion section should add the other studies which also show similar findings possibly from a different region.

Novel contributions made by this research have been added to the introduction. These include: disaggregating data on MSM and transgender women and the distinct experiences and risk faced by each group, a focus extending beyond physical and sexual violence including emotional, economic and human rights violations, taking a life-course perspective that considers violence occurring in a wider time frame and from different actors and finally, focusing on exploring the gender-based origins of violence.
Additionally, contributions to the literature made by manuscript have also been added to the discussion section. These include: use of a participatory approach to enable conversations on sensitive topics with hard to reach populations, asking KPs about how violence should be approached and suggesting ways that gender can be systematically integrated into HIV programs for most-at-risk populations.

2. The 12 contexts are quite confusing and can be reorganized much better. Some of them are context like street and public places, sex work, while some are type of violence like economic and others are perpetrators like police, intimate partners. Some like state institutions are not clear what are they or other workplace settings, again not clear what they are and need to be explained. I think instead of saying 12 context, if they can be organised into 1. Where (a different name can be used if needed) violence is experienced 2. Who perpetrate 3. What type of violence: it would be easy to understand. Otherwise I got lost a bit later as its a long manuscript.

Thank you for this helpful suggestion; we have reorganized the manuscript as you suggest focusing on the settings where violence took place, the types of violence and the perpetrators of violence instead of using what we previously referred to as contexts. We believe this makes the manuscript more understandable to the reader and greatly appreciate the guidance in helping improve the readability.

3. The tables are also bit confusing like Table 1, talks about participant demographics (all combined) but the narrative explains the break up between sub-population. It would be good to show a demographic table split by the sub population. Out of 119 FSW, how many were from which country, what was the age, what was the education level, what was employment rate. Similarly for the other two groups. It would be good to show in the demographics, what % of the three sub population do sex work as in Table 3 it looks like only 119 FSW (100%), 42 TGW and 29 MSM did sex work.

Table 1 has been revised to include participant demographics by population group and whether participants had ever engaged in sex work has been added.

Table 3 is not clear. What is total n and what is n under each column (number of respondents for the question?). The presentation is not clear.

Table 3 has been removed and key results are described narratively in the section on settings where violence occurs and perpetrators. Thank you for this suggestion, we feel it prevents an overly quantitative examination of the results.
As the sample is not random, I think we should not focus too much on the prevalence in this manuscript. It is important to show that lots of respondents experienced violence but there trying to explain it using quantitative methods can lead to questions related to method as the method was largely qualitative. The first part of the results need a sub title and can be shortened to describe the prevalence of violence without too many tables and %. It can explain about where violence takes place, type of violence and perpetrators of violence as three clear sub headings. This can be followed by Consequences. disclosure, service seeking, service wanted and perceptions of HIV risk.

These are very helpful suggestions, thank you for helping us reorganize the large amount of data into a clearer format. We have restructured the results section to de-emphasize the quantitative results and reduce the number of tables. We have removed tables 2 – 9 and, where appropriate, incorporated results into the narrative text. We have also reorganized the results to focus on the most common settings where violence occurs, types of violence and perpetrators.

Edits have been added to the portion of methods section describing the semi-structured interview guide to remove what was previously called “contexts”. Revisions have also been made to the portion of the methods section describing analysis to focus on results related to: the settings where violence occurs, types of violence reported and perpetrators of violence.

4. Limitation should include the fact that the study asked only about ‘ever’ experienced violence. They should have also asked about recent episodes like violence in last 6 months or one year to get a sense of recent violence as FSW respondents may have experienced violence even before they became FSWs.

We do not feel that asking participants about their experiences of violence without a specified timeframe is a study limitation as this was an intentional decision of the study team. Participants were asked about experiences of violence “as a sex worker”, “as an MSM” or “as a transgender woman” in order to guide them to share experiences of their choice related to their membership in one of the participant groups. Because they were asked to share experiences of violence they felt were due to their membership in one of these groups (i.e. as a female sex workers) participants are very unlikely to share violence unrelated to their membership in one of the study populations.

Early versions of the interview guides did include questions about a variety of timeframes but they were removed because they made the guide burdensomely lengthy and we wanted to focus on the open-ended portions of the conversation and give participants the autonomy to share the experiences they chose. Additionally, most participants reported on-going experiences of violence.
Clarification has been added to the methods section to state that participants were asked about violence they had experienced as members of one of the three study populations and that time frames were not specified so that participants could share experiences of their own choice.

5. The discussion section needs to be rewritten. Currently it is repetition of the results. There is no analysis. Are any of the findings new which is not there in the literature. If it is not new does it confirm some of the other findings (reference those findings). Is there any difference between the three sub population? Is there any difference if a respondent is sex worker or not? The recommendations do not necessarily refer to the findings. While implementation of policy guidelines is important, programmes do not know how to integrate GBV services with HIV. Some guidance designed to address the specific findings would be useful rather than generic guidance. Like violence in the street is highest.... so what would be the recommendation to address that? Economic violence is very high... how can that be addressed and so on. Currently they are very generic but not specific to the findings from this region.

Additional analysis was added as well as guidance on how to address specific findings. This includes, recommendations to work with key service providers such as police, health care workers and peers to change gender norms and address violence when it occurs. The recommendation to integrate GBV and HIV and expand IPV to include KPs are discussed including existing guidance from LINAKGES and USAID on how this can be done. Finally, UN efforts to document and monitor violence are discussed.