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:
This manuscript reports the qualitative findings on violence among FSW, MSM, and transgender women. Although this is a very interesting article, there are a number of areas that need to be addressed before the manuscript is ready for publication. I have detailed these suggestions by section of the manuscript:

Thank you for your careful and thoughtful review, we had addressed your comments below. A few additional changes were made to make the paper more clear or concise—all changes are tracked.

1) General comments: I am very concerned about both the inclusion of three vastly different groups in one research study. I am also concerned about the various sites that were used to collect data. Qualitative research is all about context. Given that the various populations in different countries have very different contexts, I do not believe that the authors have provided a strong enough rationale for inclusion of FSW, MSM, and trans women all in one study, with participants from various countries in the same study. Remember: qualitative research does not have to be generalizable. It appears to me that the author are trying too hard to make the results of this study generalizable to the various populations in different countries. At this point, I believe that this may be a fatal flaw in the manuscript.

The purpose of the study was to inform programming in Latin America and the Caribbean by understanding the gender-based violence that FSWs, MSM and trans women experience across their lifespan. These groups are, collectively, considered key populations affected by HIV and this study was led by LINKAGES, an HIV service delivery project for key populations affected by HIV (led by FHI 360 and supported by USAID and PEPFAR); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and The University of the West Indies (UWI) who, design and implement activates to serve these groups together. Additionally, governments and community-based organizations often serve more than one of these populations in the Latin America and the Caribbean region. For example, MSM organizations have worked with trans women where there were no groups serving them specifically and sex work organizations often work with all individuals engaging in sex work and not only cis-gender female sex workers. The intent of the study was to provide data to more effectively identify and prevent GBV among members of key populations, offer relevant, tailored support for GBV victims within HIV prevention, care, and treatment services, and support the develop of laws and policies to prevent and respond to GBV against key populations collectively.

We agree that the study sites are very different contexts that need to be considered individually. Therefore, data in each country was collected and interpreted by local peer researchers with support from local professional researchers to ensure that data was collected in a locally acceptable and relevant manner. Our intention was not to provide generalizable data; however, we believe the study findings demonstrate that—across different settings—study participants
experienced violence frequently in many settings. While the settings were different, experiences of gender-based violence were high across settings and populations. We believe that this strengthens the rational for including results from all three groups in one manuscript.

We have added a statement in the introduction about why the three study populations are grouped together to clarify as well as a statement about the intention to inform key population programming. Additionally, the limitations section has been further edited to note that, as qualitative research, study results are not generalizable.

2) Method:

a) Please provide some background on a qualitative, participatory approach for the reader who may not be familiar with this method.

We have added a description of participatory research to the methods section. Thank you for this suggestion.

b) on p. 6, line 7, the authors mention "developing data collection instruments." What specific data collection instruments were included? This does not make sense in light of the qualitative nature of the study.

Qualitative interview guides come in a range of formats from very structured to unstructured (just a list of topics to cover), depending on the topic of inquiry, how many data collectors there are, who the data collectors are, and how much is known about the topic. Given that we had 42 data collectors across multiple countries, we used structured interview guides to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions in the same manner. Data collectors were involved in identifying areas to discuss with participants and ensuring the manner of asking about sensitive subjects was appropriate. We have changed “data collection instruments” to “interview guides” to avoid confusion.

c) on p. 6, line 20, the authors mention that "sample are not...statistically representative of the study populations..." Again, this statement does not make sense in a qualitative study.

This was originally included to ensure readers did not assume results were representative of populations within each country or the region. We have revised this to emphasize that, as qualitative research, the results are not representative.
d) What specific questions were used on the interview guide? I think it would be helpful for readers if the authors could develop a table that details the interview questions.

An overview of the topics covered in the interview guides are described on page 7, lines 1 – 8. The actual guides were quite long as they included both closed-ended and open-ended questions about many different settings where participants may have experienced violence. We have added more detail on the content of the open-ended questions to the methods section. We have also considered making the interview guides available as an appendix to a paper; would this be helpful?

e) Although the authors mention saturation on p. 6, how can the reader (and this reviewer) be sure that saturation actually occurred? From what is written, I am not convinced.

The reference cited in the methods section (37) used empirical research to identify the point at which saturation occurs—within the first 12 interviews. To ensure we reached that point we conducted 15 interviews with FSWs and trans women and 20 with MSM in each study site. Additionally, 2016 study by Namey et al. published in the American Journal of Evaluation found that the median number of data collection events required to reach 80% and 90% saturation was 8 and 16, respectively for IDIs.

f) I did not see in the manuscript any description of how rigor or data verification was addressed in this qualitative study. This is very important to address so that the readers (and reviewers) can be sure that rigor was maintained. If the authors can't address how rigor was maintained throughout the data verification process, then a fatal flaw has occurred.

Page 9, lines 1 – 8 describe the process of analysis. Six qualitative researchers at FHI 360 coded all transcripts using a rigorous process. For each country, we independently coded transcripts then resolved discrepancies through discussion until we reached 100% inter-coder agreement. Following that, a total of 20% of transcripts overall were coded together to re-assess agreement during analysis. During the assessment of inter-coded agreement, the codebook was revised as needed. Additionally, each memo was reviewed by a separate research analyst to ensure data were organized thematically and summarized the original data accurately.

Additionally, the use of a piloted, structured interview guide; verbatim transcripts, the use of multiple coders and their considerable experience and training, the use of NVivo software and the use of a codebook were used to ensure rigor was maintained during data analysis. Participant interpretation meetings were also used to ensure participants and data collectors had an opportunity to provide feedback on the findings and interpret the results. As this was
participatory research, having members of key populations engaged in interpreting results ensured the validity of the results and the accuracy of interpretation.

3) Results:

a) This is a very large sample for a qualitative study. Please address.

The sample size is large given the inclusion of three participant groups and three study sites. This was driven by programmatic needs to gather information on these groups in countries where the LINKAGES project and UNDP currently work. Additionally, funders in Haiti wanted to include three different study sites (see methods section, page 5). Despite the large size, qualitative methods were used.

b) Table 1: were statistical differences found between the three groups? Please address.

No statistical tests were conducted on participant demographics. As this was a qualitative study, we did not feel this was appropriate or useful.

b) On p. 19, the authors report that "emotional trauma" occurred that was manifested in a number of subthemes. I am not sure that the subthemes really describe emotional trauma. It seems that it is more of an appropriate emotional response (sad, fearful, angry) that trauma, which tends to be an overused word without really understanding what constitutes true emotional trauma.

Thank you for this clarification; we have reviewed definitions of trauma and agree that while, in some cases, participants certainly experienced emotional trauma, it is either not possible to clinically identify their experiences as trauma or not technically appropriate in every case. We have revised “emotional trauma” to read “emotional distress”.

I believe that this is an important study, and it is evident that a lot of work has been done to revise the manuscript. However, there are a number of areas, in my opinion, that must be addressed before the manuscript is ready for publication. I hope that these comments will be useful in helping the authors revise this manuscript.

Thank you for your time and comments; we hope we have answered your concerns in the revised manuscript.