

How to Access to and Investigate Substance Abuse and Other Risk Factors from Vulnerable Population in Sexual Services

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Abstract

It is estimated that about 20,000 people engage in sex work in Bangkok. A large number of them use or abuse drugs and alcohol and are at risk for HIV/STIs. Female sex workers (FSWs) and transgender (Kathoey) sex workers (KSWs) constitute the majority of sex workers and their HIV risk is elevated by their substance use behaviors. This presentation focuses on the process of collecting scientific data in substance abuse and HIV prevention for FSWs and KSWs based on the collaboration studies between Thai and the U.S. researchers, conducted from 2004 to 2011.

We conducted mapping for the venues and areas in Bangkok where massage parlors, bars, clubs, and karaoke clubs were congregated, as well as the street spots where sex workers solicited customers for exchanging sex for money. Based on the mapping, the venues for sampling were categorized into: 1) Massage parlors (only female workers), 2) Bars and clubs (including go-go bars, night-clubs, karaoke clubs, and restaurants), and 3) Street spots. After the recruitment of the first few participants at each venue, "the snowball sampling technique" was used for the recruitment, which was culturally appropriate and sensitive to the target populations. The environmental observation using a structured check-list was also conducted at several venues to characterize the sex work environment and used to examine sampling biases. Snow-ball sampling was effective to build the rapport among sex workers at the targeted venues because the fieldworkers played key roles for networking and connecting sex workers. All participants were provided with the information about and referral services to HIV testing clinics and HIV/AIDS service agencies which are sensitive to sex workers.

A study based on interviews with 50 FSWs in 2004 found that 94% and 15% of the participants currently used alcohol and drugs (e.g., methamphetamine and ecstasy), respectively. FSWs reported that alcohol and drugs reduced their feeling of shame or shyness and stimulated sexual desire and pleasure. A study based on interviews with 112 KSWs in 2006 found high prevalence of marijuana and ecstasy use in the past 12 months (32% and 36%, respectively). Most of the KSW participants reported having had sex with customers under the influence of alcohol. The most recent study in 2008 and 2010 based on 153 short surveys and 60 qualitative interviews found that more than 75% and 34% of the survey participants reported having drunk alcohol and used illicit drugs in the past 12 months, respectively. Although the prevalence of substance use was relatively high, the substance use could be under-reported due to stigma and fear to reveal substance use to interviewers. Snowball sampling helps to build the rapport and networks among the targeted FSWs and KSWs; however, sampling biases must be considered. Therefore, respondent driven sampling methods could be also considered to recruit hard-to-reach and stigmatized populations, such as FSWs and KSWs.