



Regional Research Project on Sex Work and Violence: Understanding Factors for Safety & Protection

Ethical Guidelines

Introduction

In order to better understand violence against male, female and transgender sex workers, and to strengthen the existing evidence base to inform future advocacy and programming on gender-based violence towards sex workers and its linkages to HIV, the UNDP Asia-Pacific HIV, Health and Development Team, the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), Partners for Prevention (P4P), UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office and UNAIDS Regional Support Team in Asia and the Pacific, will jointly implement the 'Sex Work and Violence: Understanding Factors for Safety and Protection' research project in five selected countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

The primary objective of this research project will be to identify the risk and protective factors associated with sex workers' exposure to violence and HIV (during and outside of sex work) in order to develop effective programmes and policies to better respond to and mitigate risk of sex workers to violence and HIV. The project also aims to build local and regional knowledge on sex work and violence against sex workers (VASW) as well as develop alliances between regional and global civil society, networks, key donors and the media.

Ethical Guidelines

The safety and well-being of participants and researchers is paramount and will guide all decisions during the course of this research project. As such, sufficient consideration, time and resources must be dedicated to ensuring rigorous ethical standards are met including informed consent; voluntary participation; confidentiality; physical safety; no harm from research participation; provision of crisis intervention, and mechanisms to attend to researcher needs, including vicarious trauma. The project is guided by the understanding that, with such standards in place, the process of research itself has the potential to be transformative for both researchers and participants.

There are number of ethical considerations that need to be made when conducting research on VASW.

1. Sensitivity of research topic

For research on gender-based violence, the International Research Network on VAW and WHO stipulate the prime importance of confidentiality and safety; the need to ensure that the research does not cause the participant to undergo further harm (including not causing the participant further

traumatisation); the importance of ensuring that the participant is informed of available sources of help; and the need for the interviewers to respect the interviewee's decisions and choices.¹

Further key ethical considerations for specific research on violence against sex workers include:

2. Personal safety

Participation in research poses risk to sex workers. It may make their occupation visible, thus putting them at risk of violence or exploitation. It also has the potential to reduce income generation, or further entrench stigma and marginalisation, through participation or through dissemination of findings. Participants must be made aware of potential hazards of participating in the research. Good practices will be built upon to establish the principle of 'do no harm' and, with sex workers and their organisations evolve methods to promote the safety of research participants and researchers.

The physical safety of interviewees and interviewers is paramount. If the focus of the survey becomes widely known among the wider community, the sex worker may face risk from clients, partners, brothel owners or others in the community for disclosing personal experiences of violence. For people experiencing violence, the mere act of participating in a study may provoke further abuse. This may place the respondent or the interview team at risk of violence, either before, during or after the interview. For this reason, the following measures will be adopted to ensure that the research topic does not become widely known:

- To enable the respondent to explain the study to others safely, the survey will be framed under a neutral title (to be decided at the national level) and will be introduced at the community level in this manner.
- Interviews will only be conducted in a private setting. Only very young children (under 2 years old) will be permitted to be present. Where necessary, locations outside the household where the interview can be conducted in private will be identified.
- The participant will be free to reschedule (or relocate) the interview to a time (or place) that may be more convenient for him/her.
- Safety teams will be set up in each country to respond to any immediate needs of interviewers and respondents (such as lawyers, bail money etc)

As part of the overall management structure, the project will coordinate national level safety teams who will be responsible for the oversight of ethical and safety concerns and will be tasked with dealing with situations that may arise during the course of the research project (see below for more details).

3. Individual informed consent

The study will be rigorous in its efforts to ensure genuine informed consent on the part of sex workers. At the start of all the interviews, participants will be informed of the purpose and nature of the study through an informational handout and consent form. The informational handout and consent form will be developed in conjunction with sex workers to ensure that the language used is clear and appropriate, and that methods used can overcome the challenge of low levels of literacy. The respondent will be asked to sign a consent form but this may be waived in circumstances such as (i) low levels of literacy in some settings and (ii) the fear of recording their names. In such cases, the interviewer may request the verbal consent of the participant to conduct the interview and then record that the consent procedure has been administered, and note whether permission to conduct the interview has been granted.

¹ WHO, Putting Women First: Ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women 2003, pp 6-7.

The interview guide/questionnaire will also be made available to participants if they so wish, however researchers must remain mindful of the fact that possession of such a brochure might carry with it the possibility of identification, risky where participation in the study is hazardous.

Furthermore, the project will be sensitive to the use of appropriate languages/dialects when translating resources.

4. Voluntary participation

Researchers must stress that participation is completely voluntary. Participants must not be recruited under inducements or coercion of any kind. Where appropriate, incurred expenses (such as for transport or meals) can be reimbursed (this decision will be made at the national level, depending on local practices, with input from CASAM and P4P). Participants must be clear that refusal to participate will not result in any negative consequences. Participants should be made aware that they can withdraw from the study at any time. Such withdrawal will not affect any compensation already handed over. The respondent will also be free to terminate the interview at any point, and can also to refuse to answer specific questions.

5. Respect for persons

A basic respect for human dignity must include honesty between researchers and research subjects. All questions will be posed sensitively, in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. When approached by researchers, sex workers may be cautious about providing full and frank answers. This may stem from fear of exposure to harm, the desire for acceptance or embarrassment². Researchers will attempt to overcome this challenge through the following means: working with sex work organisations to shape the project and how the research will be used; peer interviewers; and openness about their own motivations and assuring confidentiality. The impact of the research process, including the consequences or possible misuse of data both for the individuals and collectives, must be evaluated. The research should avoid undue intrusion into the lives of the individuals or communities and the welfare of the informants should be prioritized at all times. Their dignity, privacy and interests should be protected at all times.

6. Confidentiality

Privacy and confidentiality are particularly important to this study given that identification as a sex worker can lead to sanctions and/or violence. The project will establish, in partnership with sex workers, protocols for the safe and secure management of data, for protecting anonymity, and for handling breaches in confidentiality. Participants should be informed of any potential limitations to the confidentiality of any information supplied. Procedures should be put in place to protect the confidentiality of information and the anonymity of the participants in all research materials.³

Mechanisms to protect confidentiality:

- All interviewers will receive strict instructions about the importance of maintaining confidentiality.
- Interviewers will not conduct an interview in their own community.
- No names or personal identifiable markers will be recorded.
- Where recordings are made of in-depth interviews these will be kept in a protected digitized format. Again, no record of the name of the interviewee will be kept.
- Where case-study findings are presented, sufficient detail will be changed to ensure that the source of the information cannot be identified.

² Augustin, L. (2004) 'Alternate ethics, or telling lies to researchers', *Research for Sex Work* June 2004: 6-8

³ Drawn from Ethical Guidelines for International Comparative Social Science Research in the framework of Management of Social Transformations programme under UNESCO (1994-2003).

7. Justice

The project is intended to benefit the communities being studied. Care will be taken to ensure that findings are communicated in ways that faithfully reflect their views and interests. It is the duty of the researchers to report back on the findings to the communities prior to public dissemination. When they are released publically, the findings will be disseminated in a scientifically rigorous manner and particular attention will be paid to ensure that dissemination in no way reinforces negative stereotypes or attitudes toward sex worker communities. Findings will be communicated with the intention of effecting change in policy as well as discourse.

8. Beneficence

The project will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that the benefits of study outweigh the risks. Interviewers will be trained to be aware of the effects that the questions may have on the informant and, if necessary, will terminate the interview if the effect seems too negative. In-depth training will be provided to the peer interviewers. The training will not only discuss interview techniques, but also how to respond, and if necessary, provide support to individuals reporting experiencing violence. Interviewers will be trained to assist if asked, but will not try to force individuals into an intervention for which they are not ready.

9. Attending to researchers' and field-workers' needs

It is likely that some interviewers – who will be peers – will have been a direct target, or have had familial experiences of violence. While this may improve the interviewers' skills and empathy, the process of being involved in the study may awaken images, emotions, internal confusion and conflict. These reactions may affect their ability to work, may have a negative impact on their health or relationships. Even where a researcher or peer interviewer has not experienced violence, listening to stories of violence and abuse may be draining and even overwhelming.

Mechanisms to support the needs of researchers and peer interviewers must be sensitive and responsive. During the research, regular debriefing meetings should be scheduled to enable the research team to discuss what they are hearing, their feelings about the situation, and how it is affecting them. These meetings will aim to reduce the stress of the field work, and avert any negative consequences.

Despite these measures, some field-workers may need to be given less emotionally taxing tasks, be given a break from the study or to withdraw from the research altogether. To account for these possibilities, sufficient numbers of peer interviewers will be recruited to allow for a 10% attrition rate of interviewers over the study.

10. Provision of crisis intervention

Prior to conducting the research, country teams should liaise with potential providers of support, including existing government health, legal, social service and educational resources in the community, and less formal providers of support) – to identify the forms of support that each is able to provide.

Based on the information collected, each research team should develop procedures for handling cases of abuse. Each research team should also produce a resource list of agencies and individuals who can provide support both during and after the survey to be offered to respondents. For safety reasons, the card will not explicitly mention VASW, and will either be sufficiently small to enable it to be hidden easily, or include contact details for a broad range of health and support services.

11. Ethics and safety mechanisms

To ensure that ethical standards are met, the project has created management and support mechanisms at the national and regional levels.

Coordination and support

Ethical and safety coordination and support will be co-led by APNSW through CASAM and P4P. The responsibilities of these parties include:

- Advising National Working Groups on establishing mechanisms at the national level for ethics and safety response;
- Providing advice and training to national level Safety Committees on ethics and safety issues, as required
- Providing information to the Steering Committee on ethical issues as they arise, which would require SC input and decision
- Provide overall ethics and safety quality assurance

Regional ethical approval

A regional level ethics board will be set up to give overall ethics approval to this research on sex workers and violence. The ethics board will be comprised of involved UN agency representation, research institutes and individual researchers who conduct research in this field, and representatives from P4P and CASAM.

The ethics board will also be responsible for advising on any major ethical issues or adverse events that occur either at the national or regional level.

National Response and Reporting

In each country, the project will coordinate a national level safety team that will be responsible for the overall wellbeing of the participants of the research. This includes oversight of ethical and safety concerns and any potential situations that may arise during the research, including but not limited to, participant harassment, confidentiality concerns, or difficulties with state institutions, such as police. The lead researcher will play a coordinating role for this body.