

Sex work, violence and HIV in Asia

An interview with Aarthi Pai, Laxmi Murthy and Meena Saraswathi Seshu, Centre for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalization (CASAM)

In 2014, a multi-country qualitative study to understand factors for safety and protection of sex workers provided undeniable evidence of the shocking violence that they endure. Pushed to the margins of society, working in unsafe conditions, risking their own health, criminalized and more often than not subjected to extreme sexual, economic and forms of brutality – the research provided insight into the nature of this violence – both inside and outside of sex work.

The study, [The Right\(s\) Evidence — Sex Work, Violence and HIV in Asia](#), was honored with the [Robert Carr Research Award](#) for its innovation and the involvement of many and diverse participants. The award also recognized the efforts made over three years to ensure a rigorous research process and robust commitment by the United Nations, the sex worker community, academic researchers and government agencies to study violence against sex workers, and to translate the study’s recommendations into policy and programmes.ⁱ



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Why is this study so important, and why now?

The scale and severity of violence uncovered in this study indicate that increased and improved efforts to prevent and respond to violence against female, male and transgender sex workers are urgently required, from a public health and HIV prevention perspective, and from a human rights perspective, and to ensure the health, well-being and justice for one of the most marginalized groups in society. Violence against sex workers is as much a public health concern as a human rights violation. The consequences of violence against sex workers on their physical, sexual and mental health are serious and long standing.

Worryingly, there are major barriers to seeking health services and to address these consequences. The extensive physical, sexual and emotional violence that sex workers face poses both direct and indirect risks to HIV transmission. Condoms were rarely used in instances of sexual assault, increasing vulnerability to transmission of HIV. Historically HIV prevention interventions have focused on promoting HIV knowledge and promoting condom use. However, this study shows that

the risk environment in which sex workers live and work, particularly the violence they face, is central to their HIV risk.

Criminalization of sex work leads to restrictions in carrying condoms, decreased ability to negotiate condom use, creates situations where sex workers have to take more risks and acts as a deterrent to both accessing health services and reporting violence to authorities.

Other reports have focused on the violence experienced by sex workers – what makes this study different?

The participation of sex workers in all aspects of research, from conception, data collection to data analysis makes this research different; it truly places the principle of 'nothing about us without us' at the centre of the process. The lead researchers were helped by the data validation meetings held with the peer researchers and respondents after the data was collated and this helped the academics in the data analysis. This is very unique in this research.

The multi-country qualitative study, **The Right(s) Evidence — Sex Work, Violence and HIV in Asia**, was developed to better understand female, male and transgender sex workers' experiences of violence, the factors that increase or decrease their vulnerability to violence and how violence relates to risk of HIV transmission. With [research](#) carried out in Indonesia (Jakarta), Myanmar (Yangon), Nepal (Kathmandu) and Sri Lanka (Colombo) the findings were intended to inform policies and programmes to prevent and respond effectively to violence against sex workers. The project's guiding principles centred on human rights, gender justice, empowerment and research for change.

The study comprised a total of 123 in-depth qualitative interviews with 73 female, 20 male and 30 transgender sex workers aged 18 or older. The interviews were conducted by other sex workers who were trained in qualitative research methods by a lead researcher, with technical inputs and guidance from Partners for Prevention (P4P) and CASAM. Additionally, 41 key informant interviews were conducted by the lead researchers with police personnel, NGO officers, health and legal service providers and national AIDS authorities for insight on contextual information to aid with the analysis and shape the recommendations. Data was collected between 2012 and 2013.

A process document outlining the entire research process and lessons learnt was also developed, "[The Right\(s\) Process: Documenting a Collaborative Research Initiative](#)". The document emerges from interactions with the researchers, peer interviewers, UN agencies and government representatives, who participated in various stages of the planning and implementation of this research and reflects their analysis of the process and its gains and learning.

Why is it so difficult to reach sex workers?

Criminalized environments and the stigma force them to hide their identity as sex workers. It is the right of every individual to keep their identity confidential. However we also recognize that it impairs their ability to reach out for redress and justice when faced with violence, or when denied important health care services. Secondly, their narratives of entry into sex work may be either completely voluntary or borne out of difficult circumstances or sometimes against their will.

However when they take a decision to stay in sex work, their narratives are often challenged and they are viewed within the frame of victims. This attitude of researchers and civil society creates distrust amongst sex workers who find it difficult to share their narratives and life histories. During the process of this research, we found that peers were often able to prevail over these attitudes and encourage sex workers to share their stories.

How can the research and its findings be used to challenge the criminalization of sex work and activities?

This research comes at a critical moment in the sex worker rights movement. Globally there has been recognition of the need to undertake structural reform and address laws and policies that harm the rights of sex workers. Reports have flagged the increased vulnerability of sex workers from State and non - state violence in criminalized settings. However, evidence of the linkages between criminalized settings of sex work and related activities and its impact on the lives of sex workers has been limited. This research seeks to bridge the gap in the voices of the sex workers. The research is also conducted as a partnership between sex worker networks/ organisations and government institutions in each country thereby creating a platform for further dialogues. This is in contrast with earlier approaches where research findings have been developed in isolation without the involvement of sex worker organisations and used to shame governments.

The evidence from this study shows that female, male and transgender sex workers are subjected to extreme levels of physical, sexual, economic and emotional violence from a range of perpetrators within their context of work (police, clients, client procurers, owners and managers of establishments they worked in) and outside it (their family, intimate partners, neighbours, health service providers and public at large).

Most respondents entered sex work to financially support themselves. In addition to economic reasons, what drives their entry into sex work is mainly gender inequality and gender-based violence for women and gender identity and/ or sexual orientation for men and transgender. Respondents worked in a variety of settings. However street work was the most common overall, which the study found to be the least safe.

This study clearly demonstrates that some laws, particularly those that criminalize sex work and homosexuality; extra-legal law enforcement practices; violent police raids and using possession of condoms as evidence of doing sex work, are the primary drivers of violence against sex workers and HIV risk. Police violence fuels a climate of impunity where clients, client procurers, owners and managers of establishments, local thugs, strangers, community members and health care workers are able to perpetrate violence against sex workers without fear of punishment.

Sex workers' experiences of violence were also influenced by their gender identities. Violence was found to be a result of gender inequality in society, and used to maintain and uphold dominant gender norms and existing power relations by punishing their transgression. To address violence against sex workers it is important to understand and respond to this social backdrop, and address the specific experiences and needs of female, male and transgender sex workers.

Work settings also determined the perpetrators of violence influenced the types of violence experienced. Notably, those working in establishments with decent work conditions, responsible owners or managers, co-workers in close proximity or associated with strong peer networks were more protected from violence or were able to resist or respond to client and police violence with greater efficacy. Recognising and realizing sex workers' right to decent work and promoting decent work conditions is a key intervention area.

What was the significance of this important research project winning the Robert Carr Research Award?

This research is not just about knowledge building, but the fact that sex work voice and agency is central to any research process on sex work. To put that idea into research and academic journals is the biggest strength of this initiative and its recognition through the award. Sex workers claimed their space to be active researchers. The academic manner of doing research has been claimed from a rights space.

To get the academia to think differently about research. No longer will sex workers be seen as subjects or respondents of the study. This research has shown that it can be done differently. The contribution of this research to peer reviewed journals is important. However this research must also be used to contribute to the discourse on VASW, which is thinking about these things in different ways – the core relevance of the findings in academic circles and in circles where ideas are produced. This has been a huge knowledge building exercise and it needs to be taken forward in the intellectual discourse and in media etc.

What was your involvement in the project?

The study involved a complex partnership at the regional and country level to plan and implement the research. Partners included UN agencies [United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Asia and Pacific Regional Office, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Asia-Pacific Regional Centre, the UNAIDS Regional Support Team for Asia and the Pacific]; the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), the Center for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalization (CASAM), and Partners for Prevention (P4P). These partners jointly conducted the study with UN country offices and sex worker-led organizations in Indonesia, Myanmar and Nepal and non-government organizations in Sri Lanka.

A Regional Steering Committee (RSC), with members from each partner, collectively provided strategic and technical guidance and administrative support, including ethics and quality assurance. CASAM was a member of the Regional Steering Committee providing technical support to the research process and coordinating with APNSW and its partners in the country to ensure that the community was involved in the entire research. CASAM developed the ethical protocols, study questionnaires, assisted in training at the regional level to initiate the study. CASAM was also responsible for writing the final regional report of the study. In a sense CASAM and APNSW ensured that the perspectives of sex workers and their concerns remained at the centre of the design and implementation of the research process.

The [summary report and the full report](#) are both available for download. [***The Right\(s\) Process: Documenting a Collaborative Research Initiative***](#) showcases this exceptional research collaboration, authored by CASAM's Aarthi Pai, was released on March 3, 2015 to mark International Sex Workers' Rights Day.

ⁱ The Robert Carr Research Award recognizes a research project conducted by a community-academia partnership that has led to evidence-based programmes and/or influenced policies in the field of HIV to guide a human rights-based response. The Robert Carr Research Award is a joint initiative of the International AIDS Society (IAS), the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations (ICASO), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health and Human Rights (CPHHR). The award is sponsored by the IAS, ICASO, the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Robert Carr Fund for civil society networks (RCNF) as a continuation of Robert Carr's vision of collaboration between community, academic researchers and advocates to advance human rights-based policies and practices. In its decision to award the prize to the study, the selection committee noted: "The participation of sex workers throughout the research process, a population often neglected by research or difficult to reach, was deemed especially important. The committee believes that the research project has the potential to achieve a great impact by influencing policies and practices in the field and providing a model for similar research projects."