

Extended Abstract

AN EXPERIMENT with APPROACHES to INTERVIEW HARD to ACCESS RESPONDENTS: A STUDY of MALE CLIENTS of FSWS in MUMBAI, INDIA

S. Mondal^{*}, R. Singh^{**}, S. K. Singh^{***} and R. Verma^{****}

Introduction:

In times of HIV/AIDS epidemic, social and behavioral scientists have undertaken lots of studies in order to understand the different facets of sex work in different parts of the globe. India is no exception. In fact, sex work has long been connected with the spread of sexually transmitted infections. This work, by definition, involves transactions between vendors and purchasers. The latter "clients" vastly outnumber those who provide sex for sale. Even so, much of the popular discussion of the health implications of sex work has always, rather myopically, concentrated on the role of the seller as the possible source of infection while largely ignoring the role of those who pay for sex. Most of the studies actually veer around the high-risk groups namely sex workers, truckers or MSM. We believe that over the years there has been a growing concern about rapidly changing pace of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Mumbai and ways and means to prevent the fuelling forces, which are complex in nature, require effective redesigning, planning and implementation of different programme in which sufficient amount of focus should be on the clients of sex workers also.

Our attempt to review the recent works on 'actual' clients (not the potential clients alone) especially in India suggests that there is absolute dearth of such studies. We could come across only two well-documented research works (Bhattacharya, 2004 and Anderson & Davidson, 2002) that are based on actual clients in India. We are of the view that the reason why there is paucity of such studies can be gleaned from the fact that getting hold of 'actual' clients for interview is really a difficult proposition. It seems much easier to conduct interviews among sex workers than those who seek sex from them. Most of them (clients) love to remain invisible to safeguard their social status and avoid stigma. Even when they are visible, they want to remain beyond the clutch of researchers or investigators or interventionists. Under these circumstances, it throws a challenge to the researchers to rope in these men for any study.

Objectives:

*** Research Scholar, IIPS, Mumbai, India**

**** Senior Research Officer, IIPS, Mumbai, India**

***** Reader, IIPS, Mumbai, India**

****** Consultant, Population Council, New Delhi, India**

The broad objective of the present paper is to critically examine some fresh approaches to overcome this challenge and how best researchers can access this seemingly inaccessible sub-population. In doing so, the present study has made use of not-so-conventional methods of data collection and finally it intends to discuss the relative efficacies of such methods mainly from six important aspects namely, *refusal rate, rapport development, reliability, ethical strength, operational convenience and financial constraints*.

Data and Methods:

In fact, the present paper is an outcome of an ongoing fieldwork for PhD dissertation in which it was decided to undertake at least 45 in-depth interviews with actual male clients of brothel based female sex workers in Mumbai, India. The study started with the basic groundwork like mapping of the particular red-light area (the site selected for PhD work), topical interviews with the organizational key informants (the different level functionaries who are in charge of running various intervention programmes in the study site) and interviews with local key informants (e.g. pimps, *panbidi* shop owners, providers etc.). Finally, it went in for conducting some in-depth interviews with the clients from the field itself without going through any organization.

The process of accessing the desired number of clients for the in-depth interviews is marked with frequent changes in the planning and strategies as the study progresses. So far we have been able to conduct 33 such interviews with the help of two well-trained highly experienced male researchers over a span of two months. We find it extremely interesting to analyze all our approaches undertaken so far so that any other similar study can benefit from our experiences in future.

So far we have tried with many ideas and approaches notable among them are 'individual follow up' method in which one researcher was asked to follow the clients in the field to seek consent from him for the interview, 'link with LKI' (local key informant) where LKI showed the actual clients and with prior knowledge, the subject was approached (not necessarily in the sex access points), 'mystery peer' where the researcher posed as a potential client in the melee of actual clients and 'mock chit-chat between two researchers' in which two researchers openly discussed about sex workers and other related topics in front of other clients in a manner that others also considered them as client.

All the methods were followed repeatedly in the field for quite some time and record was kept about the success and hindrances of all these methods. Altogether 64 clients were approached using all these methods and only 30 completed interviews have been done so far. Each interview was taken in a single sitting; no attempt of revisit was made. Researchers were given training on how to conduct 'memorized' interviews without the use of the interview guidelines in front of the respondents and jottings or any other means of recording were not done. The schedule was intentionally kept short and focused. The respondents were further requested to introduce the researchers with their peers so that they could also be subsequently interviewed for the study. Only 7 respondents agreed to do so but ultimately we could get hold of three respondents (not included in the list of

thirty respondents) through them. The two researchers were asked to exercise their judgment in terms of the 'reliability' of each of the interviews they have conducted and the level of rapport they could develop during the interviews on a five-point scale. Later on, all the main four methods were selected to critically examine their over all efficacy keeping in view the six different aspects mentioned earlier.

Results:

So far the results of the study notes that the every method has its own merits and demerits when compared on those six aspects. The overall score was highest for the 'mock chit-chat between two researchers' indicating its high level of efficacy. The study further puts a caution that the replicability of this method is subject to the high level of aptitude of the researchers and there should be sufficient number of 'visible' respondents in the study area.
