

# HIV risk and access to prevention services among male sex workers in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam



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## Background

Male sex workers (MSW) are a subset of men who have sex with men (MSM) who are at very high risk of HIV infection. Previous surveys in Vietnam have shown that high percentages of MSM (22-40%) report exchanging sex for money. However, there has not yet been any research in Vietnam that focuses on this population. The Life Centre conducted a baseline assessment of MSW in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) prior to implementing an HIV prevention intervention. This is the first project specifically targeting MSW in Vietnam.

## Methods

MSW were surveyed using both qualitative and quantitative methods in August and September 2009. In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 MSW and another 200 MSW completed a standardized questionnaire detailing demographics, sexual identity, sexual behavior, and experiences with sex work. Inclusion criteria were age  $\geq 15$ , biological male, Vietnamese nationality, and having engaged in sex work at least once in the past month. Recruitment was stratified by geographic location (7 districts) and type of MSW (street/park, massage, brothel/callboy, and bar/disco/café).

## Results

Demographic information is shown in table 1. Almost all of the MSW reported Kinh ethnicity. Other ethnicities included 7 (3.5%) Chinese, 1 Khmer, 1 Cham and 1 Nung. The median age at which the MSW recognized their sexual orientation was 18 (IQ range 17-20). The majority of MSW (62.5%) reported drinking alcohol, but only 11 (5.5%) reported daily use. The most common illicit drugs used were Ecstasy (thuốc lắc) (13.5%) and heroin (5.5%).

Characteristics of sex work are listed in table 2. The median number of years in sex work was 3. MSW from the provinces lived in the city a median of 5.5 years, indicating that they did not come to HCMC to do sex work. In the qualitative interviews many MSW said that they had tried other types of work but resorted to sex work because other work was unavailable or paid less.

Sexual behavior is shown in table 3. Median age of first sex with a woman was 18 (IQ range 17-20), younger than the median age of 19 (IQ range 17.5-22) for first sex with a man. Median age for first time selling sex was 20 (IQ range 18-23).

Tables 4 & 5 show condom use. Although use with last sex was high, 42.5% had unprotected sex in the previous month and 25.5% had unprotected anal or vaginal sex with a client.

Younger MSW had poorer knowledge and less access to HIV prevention services (data not shown). Five questions on HIV transmission were answered correctly by 39.5% of MSW  $\leq 20$  years old and 67.4% of MSW  $> 25$  years old ( $p=0.006$ ). Only 9% of MSW  $\leq 20$  years but 48% of MSW  $> 25$  years had received 3 HIV prevention materials (Figure 1,  $p < 0.001$ ). Self-reported HIV prevalence was 5.6%.

Table 1: Demographics of MSW

Age	Median (range)	25 (15-47)
Home	TP.HCM Provinces	51% 49%
Religion	Buddhist Christian Other, none	77% 10% 13%
Ethnicity	Kinh Other	93% 7%
Sexual Orientation	Homosexual Bisexual Heterosexual	47% 52% 1%
Marital status	Single Married Divorced/Widowed	94% 5% 1%
Children	Yes No	6.5% 93.5%
Education	Illiterate Primary School Middle School High School University/above	3.5% 19% 33% 35% 9.5%

Table 2: Characteristics of sex work

	Median	Range
Years in sex work	3	0 - 29
Payment for sex (USD)	8	2.5 - 50
Number male clients/month	4	0 - 30
Number anal sex clients/month	3	0 - 16

Table 3: Sexual behavior by partner type

Partner Type	n	%
Female		
Non-commercial	82	41%
Customer	26	13%
Sex Worker	16	8%
Male		
Oral Sex	181	90.5%
Anal Sex	123	61.5%
- Customer	118	59%
- Non-commercial	102	51%
- Male Sex Worker	31	15.5%

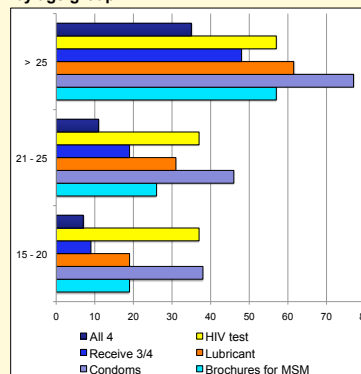
Table 4: Condom use at last sex

	Partner type	Condom use (%)
Female	Casual Partner	56
	Customer	56
	Female Sex Worker	45
Male	Oral sex	15
	Anal sex with:	
	-Casual Partner	69
	-Customer-insertive	81
	-Customer-receptive	79
-MSW	70	

Table 5: Rates of unprotected intercourse

Unsafe Sex in past month	n	%
Any unprotected sex (Anal or vaginal)	85	42.5%
Any unprotected anal sex	72	36%
Unprotected commercial sex (anal/vaginal with customer)	51	25.5%
Unprotected Anal Sex with male customer	44	22%

Figure 1: Access to HIV prevention services by age group



## Conclusions

The majority of MSW in HCMC have good knowledge about HIV prevention and practice safe sex, but almost one-quarter had unprotected sex with clients in the previous month. MSW younger than 21 years old have less knowledge about HIV prevention and less access to HIV prevention services. Interventions need to target young MSW and more widely distribute condoms and lubricant.

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