Thailand’s Policy Response to HIV Among Sex Workers: A Look Through A Gendered Lens

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The Key Question

What is the relationship between gender of sex worker and national HIV policy intervention in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand?

Significance:
- Limited research evaluating Thai policies on sex workers
- Male (MSW) and transgender sex workers (TSW) have been historically underserved, most research focuses on female sex workers (FSW)
- Local implementation of policies unclear

Goal: Providing targeted direction for future policy interventions addressing sex worker populations!

Historical Background

Thailand experienced rise of HIV/AIDS in 1980s/1990s
- Implementation of 100% Condom Program
- Controlling heterosexual transmission via FSW
- Increased funding and support for HIV/AIDS

Financial crisis in 1997
- Decrease in funding and support for HIV/AIDS

Today sex workers face high burden of HIV/AIDS
- MSW and TSW are understudied
- Policies continue to target FSW

Methods

Data Sources: UNAIDS and Thai Ministry of Public Health reports, Thai news articles
- Methods: Content analysis and thematic qualitative analysis of national policies and case studies
- National policies: Examining type and intensity of intervention

Case studies: City, HIV/AIDS surveillance, gender of sex worker, sex work industry, specific interventions
- Picking Cities:
  - Bangkok is political capital, economic center, international hub, and hot spot for sex tourism (Nutzavuthisit 2007; Singh & Hart 2007)
  - Chiang Mai is economic and cultural center for northern Thailand, but less studied (Tangmunkongvorakul et al. 2010)

Limitations: English-only documents, limited existing research

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Implications:
- Making sure there are specific and consistent groupings of sex workers
- Creating targeted interventions by population
- Equal coverage for MSWs, FSWs, and TSWs
- Coordination between public perception and policy perceptions
- Defined by the language used to describe sex workers
- Social constructions part of setting the policy agenda

Recommendations:
- Develop standard group definitions
- Expand surveillance data collection
- Engaging with community organizations
- Keeping up-to-date with technological developments
- Improving the sex work environment

Findings: Policy Analysis

Changes in policy imperative: Prevention-based
- Reach, Recruit, Test, Treat, and Retain model

Policy change keeping up with changes in HIV and changes with sex work

- “By risk group, 44% of the new adult infections were among MSM (including TG), 11% among PWID, and 10% among sex workers and their clients. It is projected that, in the subsequent five years, more than half of all new infections will be among MSM (including TG).” (Thailand AIDS Progress Report 2017, p. 13, 2017)

Focus on FSWs – in collecting surveillance data

- “…The effective prevention should be sought like the success with female sex workers.” (Follow-Up To The Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, p. 19, 2006)

Findings: Media Analysis

Policy Discussion:
- 23.7% of articles advocated for changing prostitution laws
- 13.6% mentioned the effects of condom distribution
- 11.9% mentioned education and/or awareness campaigns about HIV/AIDS
- 8.5% included the need to provide police training for interacting with sex workers
- 42.3% of all articles did not mention any type of policy or intervention

Male Sex Workers as deviants vs. Female Sex Workers as victims:
- “The daughters of Dok Kham Tai contracted HIV en masse. Thus the circle of life was lucrative but short. The girls left at 12…came home, pustuled and emaciated, to die.” (Bangkok Post, 2015)

Sex work and HIV go against traditional Thai family values:
- “‘I was driven away from home. They could not accept that I had been a prostitute,’ she says. ‘Worse still, they did not want me around because I was infected with the deadly disease.’” (The Nation, 2002)

Focus on domestic sex trade between Northern Thailand → Southern Thailand

References
Follow-Up to the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS/UNAIDS); National AIDS Prevention and Advice Centre.