"TARA BANDU", SOCIAL VALUES AND SEX WORK: THE INTERPLAY OF TRADITIONAL JUSTICE, SOCIETY AND HIV/STI PROGRAMMING FOR SEX WORKERS IN TIMOR-LESTE

Background

- Timor-Leste: young southeast Asian nation (formal independence in 2002)
- Low income classification but rapidly growing economy - predominately oil and gas revenue
- 60% of population under 25 years of age
- Significant developmental challenges but some progress against key development indicators

Background (cont…)

- Low-level HIV epidemic (<1% general prevalence), but evidence of concentrated epidemics forming in some sub-populations
  - FSW: 1.5% (2011)
  - MSM: 1.3% (2011)
- Significant Hepatitis B burden:
  - FSW: 8.3% (2011)
  - MSM: 10.2% (2011)
- Insufficient data for Syphilis/Chlamydia to generate population estimates

Project description

- Undertaken as part of national size estimation of key populations (FSW, MSM, PWUD)
- Data collection August to December 2014

Methods

- Qualitative methodology drawing on ethnographic approaches
- Key informants (i.e. FSW) and relevant secondary informants (police, community leaders) recruited through purposive sampling
- Semi-structured interviews undertaken using hand-subscribed field notes with key quotations recorded verbatim
- Notes and transcripts were translated reflexively by interviewer from source language
Methods (cont…)

- Data were analysed by co-investigator with involvement of the interviewer (a local researcher well-connected to the population) using an inductive thematic analysis approach
- Common themes and discrepant cases were coded with attention to the participants' reported experiences and key events

Results

Community acceptance

- Mixed experiences by FSW in different areas
- Some FSW participants reported a 'live and let live' attitude to their work within the community:

‘The community is not so bothered about what sex workers are doing because they say it is [our] own lives. They [the community] realises that this is how we live and sustain our lives […] this is how we afford to buy things for our family’ (FSW informant)

Results

Law enforcement

- In less urbanised settings, informants generally reported acceptance from law enforcement. Said one: ‘they [the police] say unless you have sex in public, it's OK. We do it in private so it’s OK’
- In urbanised settings such as the capital, Dili, police reportedly sometimes acted as ‘bodyguards’ for FSW (providing security but potentially placing FSW in position of vulnerability)

Results

Community acceptance

- More often, FSW reported non-acceptance, with shame often associated with sex work:

'[They say to me], “you’re a good girl, why do you become a whore?” [They say], “If you do this, your younger sisters will do the same thing” […] the community feels shame [about my behaviour] because it brings down the dignity of the community’ (FSW informant)

- One community leader: ‘If I know of any sex workers in my area, I will ask them to leave. It will destroy the future of young men and married couples’

Results

Law enforcement

- Given the ‘dual’ legal status of sex work in Timor-Leste, FSW are reportedly subject to crackdowns from police. Said one informant, ‘police and military are some of the ones who make a lot of violence against sex workers’.
Results

**Tara bandu**

- *Tara bandu* (lit.: ‘to place a ban’) is a form of traditional law used to regulate ‘undesirable’ behaviours
  - E.g. burning public land without permission; domestic violence
- In recent years, *tara bandu* have been placed to protect women from discrimination, violence and/or sexual abuse
- As reported by informants, these *tara bandu* promoting human and gender rights have been interpreted by local leaders as a means to repress sex work

Conclusions

- Even in a relatively small context such as Timor-Leste, a large variation was reported in the degree to which sex work was accepted – socially, culturally and by law enforcement
- ‘*Tara bandu*’ situation highlights difficulties in using traditional justice system to introduce modern values which may contradict established social/cultural norms
- Ongoing social and law enforcement challenges for FSW highlight the need for continued investment in sex work advocacy and community building.

Results

**Tara bandu**

- One community leader explained that if sex work occurred within his jurisdiction, ‘the woman is charged $1,000 [USD] and some buffalos.’ This fragile social space can reportedly lead FSW to be vulnerable to blackmail and coercion

Acknowledgements

- Funded by Ministry of Health Timor-Leste under a grant from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- Support from UNFPA Timor-Leste and WHO Timor-Leste