

THE SOCIAL AND SEXUAL DYNAMIC BETWEEN GAY MEN/TRANSGENDER AND THEIR STRAIGHT-IDENTIFYING MALE PARTNERS IN TIMOR-LESTE



Supporting the HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Workforce

Implementing partners



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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



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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

Background (cont...)

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. MSM&TG) 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

- 27 participants, comprising:
 - 16 MSM&TG in 8 districts
 - 11 secondary informants in six districts (inc. community leaders, NGO reps.)



Results

Three identities

In most districts with established services for MSM&TG, three distinct sub-groups identified:

- Gay, or 'MSM'
- Transgender
- *Mane forte* (lit. 'strong man'): straight-identifying MSM

In other districts where services did not exist for MSM&TG, there was less or no distinction between MSM and transgender identities

Also little distinction between the two sub-groups in the general community, with one sometimes-derogatory word used to describe both MSM and transgender: *panleiru*



Results

Sexual behaviour

- MSM and transgender-identifying people were found to typically engage only in sexual activity with straight-identifying MSM; rarely or never with other MSM/transgender-identifying people
- Reflective of the perspectives of most MSM/transgender, one MSM said, '[*Mane forte*] are strong and gentlemen. Their touch satisfies us. I don't have sexual desire for other MSM/TG' (MSM, Covalima)



Results

Straight-identifying MSM the insertive partner

- MSM and transgender were typically the receptive partner in oral or anal sex while straight-identifying MSM were the insertive partner.
- One (self-identifying) MSM said that for anal sex MSM and TG 'never' insert, because 'our credibility is as a woman; *mane forte* don't like to receive. *Mane forte* are considered the male and they are the ones who must insert' (MSM, Covalima)



Results

Transactional elements

- Sex between MSM/transgender and straight-identifying MSM was often reported to have a transactional element
- Most commonly, MSM or transgender people would pay their straight-identifying male sexual partner money and/or gifts



Results

To some, the gifts were not considered payment: they are 'just something to offer' (MSM, Covalima)

To others, the payments were more transactional: 'They have sex with us so we can [financially] sustain them' (TG, Viqueque)

'Mane forte [...] really love us, but [...] love always comes second, money is always first. [When we are in a relationship] we take care of each other, but they [mane forte] take care of us because of money. Only a very small number are passionate and show that they love us' (MSM, Dili).



Results

One straight-identifying informant:

'Some of it [the reason I have sex with men] is because of lust, some because of money; they pay us money so that we have sex with them [...] I like [my MSM partner] because he gives me money. If he didn't give me money I wouldn't have sex with him' (mane forte, Covalima).



Results

Respect between MSM/TG and their straight-identifying male partners

- All informants stated that there was a high degree of respect from straight-identifying MSM to their MSM/transgender partners.
- According to an MSM-identifying man, 'they treat us with respect. They love us just the way they love a woman' (Covalima).
- A straight-identifying MSM in Covalima said, 'I respect MSM that have sex with me and I treat them like a woman' (Covalima).



Results

Straight-identifying MSM decisionmakers in condom use

- Evidence that straight-identifying male sexual partners of MSM and transgender are the primary decision-makers in the use of condoms during sex
- One transgender informant said that if clients don't want to use condoms, they won't: 'we just accept it' (TG, Baucau). The informant reported placing a condom on their partner prior to sex, and, 'by the time I turned around [to have sex], the condom was already off (TG, Baucau).



Results

Straight-identifying MSM less likely to access MSM-centric services

- HIV prevention/testing services for MSM typically oriented to those identifying as MSM/TG
- Straight-identifying MSM reportedly less likely to access such services



Conclusions

- The degree to which financial/other incentives play a role in MSM/TG sexual practice is greater than previously reported, with transactional elements reported for most sexual relations between MSM/TG and their straight-identifying partners
- The reported power of straight-identifying MSM in sexual decision-making has implications for HIV/STI prevention initiatives, particularly given existing MSM/TG HIV education services do not cater to straight-identifying MSM.



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