

It goes both ways: a cross-sectional study of buying and selling sex among young behaviourally bisexual men in Vientiane, Laos

1. Anna L Bowring (annab@burnet.edu.au), Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia; Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
2. Caroline van Gemert (carolinevg@burnet.edu.au), Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia; Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
3. Kongchay Vongsaiya (kongchay_v@hotmail.com), Burnet Institute, Vientiane, Lao PDR
4. Chad Hughes (chad@burnet.edu.au), Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia
5. Amphoy Sihavong (amphoys@yahoo.com), Vientiane Capital Health Department, Ministry of Health, Vientiane, Lao PDR
6. Chansy Phimpachanh (gfachas.chansy@gmail.com), Centre for HIV, AIDS and STI, Ministry of Health, Vientiane, Lao PDR
7. Niramonh Chanlivong (niramonh@hotmail.com), Burnet Institute, Vientiane, Lao PDR
8. Mike Toole (toole@burnet.edu.au), Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia
9. Margaret Hellard (hellard@burnet.edu.au), Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia; Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Corresponding author:

Anna Bowring
Burnet Institute
85 Commercial Rd, Melbourne, Victoria
Australia, 3004
annab@burnet.edu.au

Abstract

Background: Transactional sex may increase risk of HIV and STIs. In Laos men who have sex with men are disproportionately affected by HIV and bisexual behaviour among men is relatively common. We explore the occurrence of transactional sex among behaviourally bisexual men in Vientiane, Laos.

Methods: In 2010, behaviourally bisexual men were recruited through enhanced snowball sampling to complete a behavioural survey. We describe reports of transactional sex partners (anal/vaginal sex) in the previous year by direction of payment and partner gender.

Results: Of 88 participating behaviourally bisexual men (median age 22 years), 17 (19%) reported only selling sex, eight (9%) reported only paying for sex, and nine (10%) reported both selling and paying for sex. Men reporting any transactional sex reported a median of four transactional sex partners and reported a higher number of total sex partners in the previous 12 months (median: 18.5) than men reporting no transactional sex partners (median: 6).

Of 26 men reporting selling sex, 15 (58%) were paid by female, 15 (58%) were paid by male, and 14 (55%) were paid by transgender sex partner(s); 11 (42%) reported consistent condom use (CCU) when selling sex.

Of 17 men reporting paying for sex, 13 (76%) paid female, six (35%) paid male and two (12%) paid transgender partner(s); eight (47%) reported CCU when paying for sex.

Conclusions: Young behaviourally bisexual men engaging in transactional sex may be at increased risk of HIV and STIs. Prevention interventions should consider the transient and informal nature of transactional sex in this population.

Running head

Buying and selling sex among bisexual men in Laos

Keywords

Bisexuality, men who have sex with men, transactional sex, commercial sex, sexual behaviour, HIV, Laos

Background

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic (herein referred to as Laos) transactional sex is usually considered in the context of female sex workers.¹ While female sex workers are more often the focus of international reports and research, worldwide men sell sex in a variety of contexts,² and Laos is no exception. Transactional sex encompasses the exchange of sex for money, goods, and favours and considers people who may not identify as sex workers.³ In a 2007 study of men who have sex with men in Vientiane, Laos, 22% had recently received money for sex, and 28% had recently paid for sex.⁴ Qualitative research also supports that exchange of money or other goods is relatively common in male-to-male relationships in Laos, particularly with paying younger males.⁵ Globally, there is concern that engaging in transactional sex may increase men's risk of HIV.³ In Laos, men who have sex with men are disproportionately affected by HIV (prevalence 5.6% in 2007 compared to 0.2% in the general population), and there is limited evidence that male-to-female transgenders and men who have sex with men who have sold sex may have higher HIV prevalence than their peers who do not sell sex.^{4,6}

Worldwide, a substantial proportion of men who transact sex identify as bisexual or heterosexual, and may sell sex to men and/or women.³ Bisexual behaviour among men in Vientiane is relatively common,^{4,7} and young men who sell sex often report having both female and male clients.⁷ However, there are no detailed data exploring the gender of transactional sex partners among bisexual men in Laos. In 2010, we conducted a study of behaviourally bisexual men and their sexual partners in Vientiane, Laos to assess the potential risk for HIV transmission through these networks. Previously reported results showed that behaviourally bisexual men commonly reported transactional sex; 30% reported being paid for sex and 19% reported paying for sex.⁸ Other high risk behaviours, including low rates of consistent condom use and multiple sexual partners, were also widespread.⁸ In this paper, we expand on these results and further explore the occurrence of transactional sex among behaviourally bisexual men in Vientiane by considering gender, direction of payment and implications for risk and HIV prevention in Laos.

Methods

Recruitment methods have been described previously.^{8,9} In brief, a retrospective cross-sectional behavioural survey was conducted in Vientiane, Laos between June and October

2010. Behaviorally bisexual men and their sexual partners were recruited through enhanced snowball sampling, starting with ten behaviourally bisexual male recruits (“seeds”), and continuing for two to three waves of recruitment. Each participant could refer up to five of their past year sexual partners. Participants were required to be aged 18 years and older and to have engaged in anal, vaginal or oral sex in the previous 12 months. Prior to recruitment a mapping exercise was used to identify locations where bisexual men socialized in Vientiane. In order to broaden representativeness of the final sample, seeds were purposively selected from different sites and intentionally included seeds with diverse attributes, such as sexual identity, education, and number of sex partners.

This analysis is limited to male participants who reported anal or vaginal sex with male and/or kathoey and female sex partners in their lifetime (behaviourally bisexual men). For the purpose of brevity, herein they will be referred to as bisexual men. Kathoey is short for *kathoey phom yao* or *kathoey teng ying* and is the common term in Laos and Thailand for male-to-female transgenders, who are birth-assigned males but self-identify as female (or non-male), and may appear and act as female or male.¹⁰

Data were analysed using Stata (Version 11, Stata Corp., College Station, Texas, USA). Transactional sex was defined as anal or vaginal sex with paid or paying partners during the previous 12 months. For each gender and transaction type, participants self-reported number of sex partners and condom use in the previous 12 months. We describe the proportion of bisexual men who report no transactional sex partners, only paying for sex (participant gave money, gifts or favours to at least one person in return for sex), only selling sex (participant received money, gifts or favours from at least one person in return for sex), and both paying for and selling sex in the previous 12 months. In each of these categories, we report on the median number of transactional sex partners and total number of sex partners in the previous 12 months. Number of transactional sex partners as a proportion of total number of sex partners was calculated individually, and the median proportion is reported. Median number of total sex partners was compared between those reporting any and no transactional sex partners using a Mann-Whitney Test to significance level $p < 0.05$.

Among bisexual men paying for sex and selling sex, we respectively describe the proportion reporting male, female and kathoey transactional partners and consistent condom use (CCU) when paying for or selling sex with respective partners. CCU was defined as always using a condom during anal and vaginal sex in the previous 12 months.

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethical review committees of the Alfred Hospital and Australian National University, Australia; and the University of Health Sciences, and the National Ethics Committee for Health Research, Laos.

Results

Overall, 342 sexual partners were nominated through snowball sampling, and 298 (87%) individuals participated in the behavioural survey, of which 189 were male. Eight males were excluded due to incomplete data on gender of lifetime sex partners. The remainder of the analysis is based on 88 (49%) males who reported anal/vaginal sex with women and men and/or kathoey in their lifetime (i.e. behaviourally bisexual). The median age of bisexual men was 22 years (inter-quartile range [IQR] 20-24). The majority (75%) reported any higher education, and 63% were currently studying (table 1). Half of men were currently employed, and the most common settings of employment were in an office (47%) or bar/nightclub (18%). Two men reported working in a massage parlour or sauna. Four men had ever been married (three currently married), and all of these men reported having children. Men most commonly reported living in a dormitory or share room (42%) or with parents (34%).

Of the 88 bisexual men, 17 (19%) reported only selling sex (median of five transactional sex partners), eight (9%) reported only paying for sex (median: 4), and nine (10%) reported both selling and paying for sex (median: 6.5) in the previous 12 months (table 2). Fifty-four (61%) bisexual men reported no transactional sex partner, including two men reporting only transacting oral sex.

Twenty-two out of 34 men reporting any transactional sex had complete data on number of sex partners. Based on these men, men reporting any transactional sex reported a higher number of total sex partners in the previous 12 months (median: 18.5) than men reporting no transactional sex partners (median: six; $p=0.01$) (table 2). Among men reporting any transactional sex, transactional sex partners accounted for a median of 29% of all sex partners.

Of the 26 bisexual men reporting ever selling sex in the previous 12 months, men reported selling sex to female (58%), male (58%), and kathoey (55%) sex partners. Overall, 11 (42%) bisexual men reported CCU when selling sex, ranging from 27% CCU when selling sex to female partners to 60% CCU when selling sex to male partners (table 3).

Of the 17 bisexual men reporting ever paying for sex in the previous 12 months, men reported paying for sex from female (76%), male (25%), and kathoey (12%) sex partners. Overall, eight (47%) bisexual men reported CCU when paying for sex, and this was similar when paying female (46%), male (50%) and kathoey (50%) partners (table 3).

There was considerable overlap in bisexual men reporting male, female and kathoey sex partners. Among 34 bisexual men reporting any transactional sex partner, three (9%) reported male and kathoey transactional sex partners, five (15%) reported female and kathoey, four (12%) reported female and male, and six (18%) reported female, male and kathoey transactional sex partners.

Discussion

In this study of young behaviourally bisexual men in Vientiane, we found that it is relatively common for bisexual men to transact sex, but the gender and direction of payment vary and frequently overlap. Our results suggest that young bisexual men who transact sex may be at higher risk of HIV and STIs than those who do not transact sex. However, sexual transactions may not be the main source of the elevated risk; multiple sex partners and condomless sex with non-transactional sex partners may be more important.

Thirty-nine percent of bisexual men reported any transactional sex partner in the previous year, of which one-quarter reported both buying and selling sex, and over one half reported more than one gender of transactional sex partners. Previous studies have reported that men selling sex in Laos are driven by financial reasons,⁷ but this does not fully explain the combination of both buying and selling sex seen in some men. While other studies have focused on men selling sex to kathoey⁵ and buying sex from women,⁷ we found that a similar proportion of bisexual men sold sex to male, female and kathoey partners, and as well as paying female partners, one third of bisexual men who bought sex paid male partners. Further qualitative research is needed to elucidate how partner gender affects the motivations, perception and negotiation of transactional sex.

That nearly 30% of all sex partners were transactional demands a more nuanced view of transactional sex in this population. It is relatively small proportion to what one may expect from commercial sex workers, and suggests that bisexual men transacted sex informally and occasionally rather than as a sole source of income. In support of this, most men did not work in traditional settings associated with direct sex work.¹¹ Only three men reported

working at a massage parlour, sauna or hotel where direct sex work may occur in Laos.¹² A number of men worked in bars, clubs or beer shops, which may be associated with sex work,¹ but given the relatively low number of transactional sex partners in the past year (median of four), it is unlikely that these men were working for the sole purpose of selling sex. Nonetheless, in the context of men who likely do not identify as sex workers, transactional sex still accounted for a considerable proportion of sex partners. Further, transactional sex existed within complex networks also involving regular and casual partners, all of which may be contributing to risk of HIV and STIs in this group. Subsequently, a dyadic model of risk and intervention involving sex workers and their clients, common in dialogue on female sex workers, is unlikely to adequately address HIV risk and transmission in this context.

Even though the number of transactional sex partners was relatively low, bisexual men reporting transactional sex partners had a substantially higher number of sex partners overall compared to bisexual men not engaging in transactional sex. This has also been reported in other settings among men who sell sex.^{13, 14} High numbers of partners may be indicative of concurrent relationships or frequent partner turnover, both of which increase risk of HIV and STI transmission.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Less than half of men reported CCU with transactional sex partners whom they sold sex to or bought sex from. This was similar for all partner genders, although trending towards lower CCU when selling sex to female partners. In comparison, bisexual men from the same study reported 7% CCU with regular partners and 35% with casual partners.⁸ Thus, while CCU was relatively higher with transactional sex partners, it still poses high-risk of disease transmission, particularly when in conjunction with numerous sex partners. Further research is needed to understand whether transactional sex was negotiated as one-off or recurring engagements and how this may influence condom use and risk.

These results emphasise the importance of including bisexual men in conversations and initiatives around transactional sex in Laos. Currently transactional sex in Laos predominantly considers service women or female sex workers, who have relatively lower HIV prevalence (0.7%) than men who have sex with men (5.6%),^{4, 18} and who reported higher CCU when selling sex (70%).¹⁸ Our study shows that transactional sex is relatively common among bisexual men and coincides with other high-risk behaviours such as multiple sex partners. However it is difficult to draw absolute conclusions about increased HIV and STI risk because there is limited biological data for bisexual men in Laos. The aforementioned

study reported similar HIV prevalence between behaviourally bisexual (6.1%) and homosexual (5.2%) men, while disaggregated data on STI prevalence is not known.⁴ However, the sexual networks of bisexual men include men who have sex with men, female sex workers and kathoey,⁹ who each have moderate to very high prevalence of chlamydia and gonorrhoea.^{18, 19} Other settings have demonstrated that bisexual men have lower engagement in HIV prevention programs than other men who have sex with men and are less likely to access HIV testing,²⁰⁻²² thus increasing risk of undiagnosed infection. In Laos, programs for men who have sex with men largely cater to kathoey and effeminate men,^{23, 24} and bisexual men who identify as straight may not feel comfortable in these settings nor be adequately engaged in these programs.⁵

Inclusion of bisexual men in HIV prevention and sexual health programs should be done by focusing on risk behaviours rather than risk-groups, in order to facilitate more comprehensive coverage of relevant messages and account for overlapping risk behaviours in a manner not dependent on identity – whether it be sexual identity or identity as a sex worker.²⁵ Previous work from this study has shown that bars, night clubs and beer shops are the most common settings for young bisexual men to meet sex partners, and that these venues may be particularly useful to reach men with high-risk behaviour and heterosexual-identifying bisexual men.¹² Key points of intervention should include promotion of consistent condom use with all sexual partners, frequent voluntary HIV testing and counselling, routine STI screening and treatment, and early initiation of antiretroviral therapy (ART).^{26, 27} In addition to education and counselling, structural interventions are needed to support the availability of affordable condoms and lubricant, clear guidelines for asymptomatic STI testing and the strategic use of ART, and improved access to comprehensive sexual health services.

This study has a number of limitations. First, the sample size limits the study power to detect differences in number of sex partners by different levels of engagement in transactional sex, and small cell sizes in some analyses should be noted when interpreting estimates. Second, the sample was recruited using a non-probability sampling method, and caution should be exercised when inferring study results to the broader population of bisexual men in Vientiane. There are no robust estimates of the size or profile of the bisexual male population in Laos in order to assess the representativeness of this sample;²⁸ however, this sample of bisexual men is young, relatively well educated, and only a few men had ever been married, and thus results may not be representative of older bisexual men who have

married but continue to have sex with men and/or kathoey or less educated bisexual men. Nonetheless, using restricted snowball sampling helped to limit the influence of seeds on the final sample composition and helped to recruit a relatively diverse group of bisexual men who are difficult to capture through probability-based sampling methods.²⁹ Third, a long recall period of 12 months was used to assess number of partners and CCU and may have increased recall bias.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we found that a substantial proportion of young behaviourally bisexual men in Vientiane transact sex, but they may do so irregularly and occasionally. Both paying for and selling sex was common, as was reporting transactional partners of multiple genders, thus alluding to complex and varied motivations for transactional sex in this setting. High numbers of overall sex partners among those who transact sex, as well as low CCU, suggest that these men are at increased risk of HIV and STI transmission. Prevention initiatives targeting bisexual men in Laos should incorporate education and health promotion related to transactional sex.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author's contributions

The following co-authors have contributed to the work: AB in data analysis, manuscript preparation, and manuscript review; CVG in study design, coordination, staff training and manuscript review; KV in study coordination, staff training, data collection and manuscript review; CH in study design, staff training and manuscript review; AS in technical oversight and manuscript review; CP in technical oversight and manuscript review; NC in study coordination and manuscript review; MT in study design and manuscript review; MH in study design and manuscript review. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participating bisexual men

	Bisexual men	
	n	%
Number of participants	88	100
Age group (years)		
18-19	14	16
20-24	56	64
25-29	14	16
30-32	4	5
Currently studying	55	63
Completed higher education ¹	66	75
Currently employed	45	51
Office	21	47
Bar/nightclub/beer shop	8	18
Restaurant	4	9
Home	4	9
Massage parlour/sauna	2	4
Shop	2	4
School/university	2	4
Hotel	1	2
Construction site	1	2
Ever been married	4	5
Originally from Vientiane	39	44
Living arrangement		
Share room or dormitory	37	42
Live with parents	30	34
Live with relative/s	13	15
Live with partner	3	3
Live alone	2	2
Other	3	3

¹ *Higher education* defined as any education beyond upper-secondary school

Table 2. Transactional sex encounters in the previous 12 months among behaviourally bisexual men (n=88)

			Number of transactional sex partners	Total number of sex partners ⁴
	n	%	median (IQR)	median (IQR)
No transactional sex partner	54	61	NA	6 (4-10)
Only sold sex ¹	17	19	5 (3-9)	24 (4-44)
Only paid for sex ²	8	9	4 (1-5)	14 (5-20)
Paid and sold sex	9	10	6.5 (3-13)	16 (10.5-56.5)
<i>Any transactional sex</i> ³	34	39	4 (3-10)	18.5 (5-44)

¹Participant received money, gifts or favours for sex from at least one person in the previous 12 months.

²Participant gave money, gifts or favours to at least one person in the previous 12 months in exchange for sex.

³Participant exchanged money, gifts or favours for sex with at least one person in the previous 12 months, either selling sex or paying for sex.

⁴Anal and/or vaginal sex partners in the previous 12 months.

IQR: inter-quartile range

Table 3. Proportion selling and paying for sex from female, male and katoey sex partners, and consistent condom use when selling and paying for sex.

	Ever sold sex ¹		CCU ² when sold sex		Ever paid for sex ³		CCU ² when paid for sex	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Total	26	30	11	42	17	19	8	47
Female	15	58	4 ⁴	27	13	76	6	46
Male	15	58	9	60	6	35	3 ⁴	50
Katoey	14	54	6	43	2 ⁴	12	1 ⁴	50

¹Participant received money, gifts or favours for sex from at least one person in the previous 12 months.

² CCU: Consistent condom use, reports always using a condom during anal and vaginal sex in the previous 12 months.

³Participant gave money, gifts or favours to at least one person in the previous 12 months in exchange for sex.

⁴Note, small cell sizes (n<5) should be interpreted with caution.

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