

**UNDERSTANDING SEXUALITY, SEXUAL AND  
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH OF YOUNG FEMALES ENGAGING  
IN INDIRECT SEX WORK IN VIENTIANE, LAOS**



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TANCHAINUN, M.A., VEENA SIRISOOK, DR.P.H.****ABSTRACT**

This qualitative research studies the sexuality of young females engaging in indirect sex work and its effects on their sexual and reproductive health. A postmodern feminist perspective is used to explore how gender discourses on women, discourses on sex work, agency and negotiation play roles in sexuality and sexual and reproductive health of young females engaging in indirect sex work. Twelve young females were recruited by using the snowball technique through their peer network of indirect sex workers. In-depth interviews and non-participant observation were the main methods for data collection between July and October 2008 in Vientiane, Laos.

The findings show that gender discourses on young women and discourses on sex work are an important component that influence the sexuality of young females engaging in indirect sex work and their sexual and reproductive health. They are diverse in identities. Though they are invisible to stigmatization by society because they do not habit a brothel and they live like women in general, they perceive themselves as “bad women and bad daughters” and this affects their self-esteem. However they compensate by striving to become a “good daughter” by providing financial support for their family.

They regard themselves as different from direct sex workers in terms of the power of negotiation as they have more liberty to choose or refuse clients than direct workers. However, condom use with clients or regulars partners is inconsistent because it is related to gender roles, trust and intimacy. This study reveals that young females in indirect sex work face severe sexual and reproductive health problems such as unwanted pregnancy, violence, and HIV. Self care with consulting peers is the common practice to deal with health problems as they were afraid of disclosure and stigmatization if they go to the hospital.

Involvement of peer educators and outreach workers who were or are themselves indirect sex workers are suggested for successful health programs working with indirect sex workers. Knowing the sexual issues of indirect sex workers will help promote sexual and reproductive health programs. Promoting life skills and women’s rights will empower them with high self-esteem and dignity when dealing with problems in their indirect sex work. Peer education and outreach programs are the appropriate ways to reach the indirect sex workers.

**KEY WORDS: YOUNG FEMALE/INDIRECT SEX WORK/SEXUALITY/SEXUAL  
AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH/GENDER IDENTITY/LAOS**

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