ABSTRACT

This exploratory study attempts to describe and understand the urban lifestyle of unmarried female migrant factory workers in Vientiane, Lao PDR. The study aims to understand the women’s social networks, their leisure activities including sexual-related activities, their relationship with male partners, and their understanding of safe sex practices. The research explores ideologies that shape sexuality and sexual practices, and situations that contribute to vulnerabilities and risks of sexually transmitted infections among the women.

This is a qualitative research that uses in-depth interviews (15 women) as data collection methods. Other resource persons besides the factory women are factory security guards, factory healthcare providers, and the women’s supervisors at work and at their dormitory.

The results reveal that female migrant factory workers spend their free time differently. Some women like to stay in, do household chores, watch television and chat with neighbors and friends. Some women like to go out with friends, and boyfriends to have dinner and drink. The “outgoing” women’s social networks are established primarily with their workmates, their circle of friends, and their neighbors. Their places to go for night entertainment include night clubs, discotheques, beer shops, karaoke bars, and restaurants. The women’s current urban sexuality changed from their rural sexuality. Once in Vientiane, these rural women have sex before marriage. This new face of sexual practice is rationalized by the women as being modern, being in a new age, and being up-to-date. Female migrant workers are vulnerable to infections of sexually transmitted infections. The women’s male partners feel more sexual pleasure without a condom. The women themselves believe that sex without a condom means real love for her partner.

Without knowledge and skills in safe sex practices, migrant women in Vientiane are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. The shifts of sexual ideology and sexual practices among the women (from traditional rural sexuality to urban sexuality) are due to their being away from their rural homes, the freedom and modern lifestyle in Vientiane they have gained, and peer pressure to become modern and “urbanely” accepted.

KEY WORDS: MIGRATION / FEMALE FACTORY WORKER / IDEOLOGY / SEXUALITY / LAO PDR.