

## **Ethical issues in research conducting in sex workers in Vietnam**

**Background:** In Vietnam, sex work is considered not work but an illegal and serious “social evil.” While research on sex workers is growing, little is known about ethical protection for sex workers who are research participants.

**Methods:** This presentation will review ethical issues in research conducted on sex workers and capability of the current research ethics system to protect sex workers in Vietnam.

**Findings:** Main ethical issues in research conducted on sex workers in Vietnam are lack of valid informed consent, lack of confidentiality assurance, lack of access to research results and lack of care and support for research subjects. Current system of oversight of research is weak in both theory and practices. Although Good Clinical Practice was released on 2008, it only focuses on clinical trials. There is no national guideline on ethical conduct on human research with specific consideration of vulnerable populations including sex workers. Appointment of members of the Ethics Committee and final approval of research proposals are decided by the Ministry of Health. This raises questions about the independence of the Ethics Committee of Ministry of Health (MoH).

**Conclusion:** In the absence of legal protection, lack of ethical protection makes sex workers in Vietnam vulnerable when participating in research. To protect the well being of sex worker research subjects, three levels of ethical discourse should be developed. At micro level, researchers should be trained on how to do a research on vulnerable populations scientifically and ethically in order to respond to their health needs and respect integrity of sex workers. At meso level, while decriminalization or legalization sex work is unlikely to occur in short term, there is an urgent need to develop a national guideline on ethical conduct in human research including detailed guidance on protecting research participants who might be involved in illegal activities. At macro level, sex workers in Vietnam should integrate into a regional network of sex workers for being empowered and should be trained to conduct research on their own.