

# The impact of criminal law related to sex work and male-to-male sex on HIV among key populations in Papua New Guinea

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## Background:

International HIV guidelines call for the reform of laws criminalising practices associated with key populations. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), male-to-male sex and some forms of sex work are criminalised. This qualitative study investigated how men with diverse sexualities, transgender women, and female sex workers understand and make sense of criminal laws on their lives and the HIV response in PNG.

## Methods:

This research is based on in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion with 63 people including: 1) female sex workers (FSW) (n=30), 2) men with diverse sexualities (MDS) and transgender women (TGW) (n=33). Interviews were conducted in three cities: Lae (Morobe Province), Port Moresby (National Capital District), and Goroka (Eastern Highlands Province). Participants were asked about their knowledge and experiences of the law and its impact on their lives, including sexual practices, means of economic income, and health seeking practices.

## Results:

Participants had mixed knowledge about laws criminalising male-to-male sex and sex work. Few participants experienced being charged with criminal offences or defending their rights through legal institutions. Although blackmail and violence was commonplace, particularly by the police, participants rarely connected it to criminalisation. Among FSWs there was a shared narrative that possessing condoms in their bilums could be used by the police as evidence of sex work, therefore placing them at risk of blackmail. Conceptually, many participants understood that they had general human rights protections. In practice, they provided little concrete protection against their violation.

## Conclusion:

While there have been efforts in the past to achieve law reform in PNG, it has proven difficult. Although drawing attention to human rights and their violations are an important and necessary step, it is critical to increase and support greater legal literacy among affected communities to mobilise civil society and advance law reform.

## Disclosure of Interest Statement:

There is no disclosure of interest to report.