

Using Unique Identifier Codes to Improve Outreach Among Sex Workers

Ms Nguyen Thi Thanh rides on the back of a scooter driven by her colleague towards an alley lined with cafés selling hot tea, iced coffees and beer. These cafés serve as a front for a bustling sex work business in Hai Phong, Vietnam, and is where Thanh goes door-to-door talking with sex workers about condoms and getting tested for HIV at a local Voluntary Counseling (VCT) Center. Some of the sex workers Thanh meets inject heroin, and she speaks to them about their behaviors around drug use.

Unsafe commercial sex is one of the primary drivers of the HIV epidemic in Vietnam. Among sex workers, HIV prevalence ranges from 5% and 20% (Source: IBBS 2009). Prevalence rates are 20 times higher among sex workers who inject drugs, since they face the dual risk of unsafe sexual practices and injecting drug use.



Outreach worker Nguyen Thi Thanh talks with a sex worker about how to protect herself from HIV.
Photo by Ben Johnson

Thanh works for *Song Dep* (Beautiful Life), an intervention that promotes HIV prevention products and services to sex workers, including sex workers who use drugs, under the USAID Social Marketing for HIV Prevention Project. In 2010, USAID's Song Dep project made nearly 40,000 contacts with sex workers across four priority provinces. The project uses an innovative MIS tool called Unique Identifier Codes (UIC) to monitor and track the coverage of its outreach activities. Many of the sex workers Thanh meets will not stay around for long. After an average of six months, most sex workers move on to another district or province, may be arrested, or quit sex work. That leaves Thanh with a critical window of time to reach each sex worker in her coverage area.

Using UIC, the project determined it had reached 6,100 individual sex workers, for an average of 6.5 times throughout the year, and that 13% of all sex workers reached during the year also reported using drugs. Estimates of how many sex workers there are in Vietnam vary widely, but by using UIC data the project is better able to understand the scale and coverage of its program activities.

Hong is a 26-year-old sex worker based in one of the cafés that Thanh visits. She recently moved to Hai Phong from a rural area of Vietnam and lives with a few other friends who sell sex in the same café. Hong says, "I started this work to earn some money. Once I save up enough, I will move back to my village and start a business." Hong is lounging on a couch with a few other sex workers in the reception area in the café, nursing a small cup of tea when Thanh arrived. There isn't much to do in between clients, and seeing Thanh raised Hong's curiosity. Thanh recognized Hong as someone new, and sat next to her to start an outreach session.

Sex workers try hard to keep their identity secret in case the police, or family and friends, discover them. The UIC system allows the project to monitor coverage of each sex worker, while respecting their need for anonymity and privacy. Each sex worker is assigned a nine-digit code based on information unique to each person, using the first initials of their parent's names, the province where they were born, their gender, and the year of their birth.

When they finished their discussion, Thanh explained the UIC system to Hong and asked if she would share her information to make the code. At first Hong was reluctant. She wanted to remain anonymous and did not want anyone to identify her as a sex worker. But after Thanh explained how the codes were created and used, Hong felt she could safely share her information. "I realized the code could not be used to trace me, but more than that I realized that Song Dep had an interest in protecting me."

The UIC System is the first such model for Vietnam, and USAID's Song Dep project is generating lessons and tools which are being used to integrate UIC into other USAID-funded interventions in the country. The Vietnam Administration of HIV/AIDS Control (VAAC) has endorsed the UIC system, and has officially asked partners to integrate it into their intervention. The project has provided UIC training and follow up support to other PEPFAR partners targeting sex workers, and a pilot is currently being implemented in Hai Phong province before expanding to other priority provinces across Vietnam.