

Increasing HIV Prevalence among Female Sex Workers in Indonesia: How is it Presented in the Media and in Scholarly Journals?

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Abstract

Within different target audiences, the media and scholarly journals have significant roles in enhancing the awareness and influencing the development of HIV prevention-related policies. However, particularly in developing and poor countries, the media seem to affect policy development in contradictory ways. Thus, it is interesting to investigate how the increasing prevalence of HIV among female sex workers (FSWs) in Indonesia is represented in the media and to compare this representation with those in scholarly articles. Using three types of newspaper and peer-reviewed scholarly articles, this paper found that the media tend to frame the problem and its risk factors as merely a health problem produced by unsafe behaviours that are inappropriate to the local culture and belief. Efforts to challenge dominant values through the involvement of local media should encourage local journalists to be aware of the consequences of their chosen media template. Furthermore, given the fact that the majority of scholarly articles included in the analysis focused more on the biological and behavioural factors of HIV infection, more social research is needed.

Keywords: media, HIV, and policy

Introduction

Agenda setting refers to the process by which a public problem becomes noticeable by political elites and gets considered as a political issue to be solved or responded to.¹ This process has been acknowledged as an important step in the development of the policy cycle; it shapes how the policy will present a problem and how the state will locate resources and efforts to address the problem presented.² The process of putting the problem into the policy agenda itself is influenced by many actors. Initially, the process focuses on the roles of state actors, such as politicians and bureaucrats; however, there has recently been greater involvement of other influential actors, particularly the media and researchers, both of which have the capacity to influence policy practices.^{3,4}

The roles of media in policy practice lie on the connection between three events: first, the presentation of the problem in media; second, the audience's reception and perception of the importance of the problem; and last, how these influence policy choice.¹ Recent policy communication literature defines these three events as framing, agenda setting, and priming. The media choose an issue to present (framing), feature the issue in sufficient frequency to make it salient (agenda setting), and shape people's discretion regarding the issue (priming).⁵ Meanwhile, research could influence policy practice by helping policy makers in identifying public problems, setting priorities, developing solutions, and evaluating outcomes.⁴ From the viewpoints of policy makers, media and research could be significant tools in campaigning for their choice of issue and convincing policy stakeholders that the chosen policy is publicly supported and evidence-based.^{4,5}

In the development of HIV/AIDS-related policy, media and research have played key roles in shaping both public opinion and public policy.^{6,7} Whereas research has helped HIV/AIDS activists to advocate the best evidence for the development of effective HIV/AIDS-related policy by examining problems and risk factors, the media, especially in developing and poor countries, seem to affect policy development in two different ways. First, the media could play a negative role by blaming certain groups for the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and ignoring the reality of the problem; for example, the media in Asia tend to concentrate on the high number of sexual transmission of HIV and ignore the effective prevention method for the disease.⁸ Second, the media could have a positive effect by increasing public awareness of the problem and promoting prevention methods, such as partner fidelity, safe sex, and harm reduction.^{8,9} Thus, based on their chosen template, whether positive or negative, the media have played a vital role in influencing public opinion.^{8,10}

In Indonesia, during the early stage of the epidemic in the 1990s, HIV/AIDS transmission was predominantly by drug injection, with a small number of reports of HIV infection by sexual transmission.¹¹ At this stage, the local media in Indonesia were reluctant to frame the connection between sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS.⁸ However, by 2002, the reports of HIV/AIDS cases in Indonesia showed a shift toward primarily heterosexual transmission, with female sex workers (FSWs) and their clients as the most affected groups.¹² The national serological survey, conducted by the Ministry of Health every two years since 2002, reported an increasing trend of HIV prevalence among FSWS with low rates of consistent condom use.¹³ The increasing HIV

prevalence among FSWs has been recognized as a potential bridge for expanding the epidemic in the general population. Considering that Indonesia has more than 200,000 FSWs with more than 10 million clients, this is a serious public health problem to tackle.¹²

Therefore, the examination and comparison of how the media in Indonesia and scholarly articles present this problem, particularly after the shift in the dominant transmission mode, are important. The results will help us to understand how HIV issues among FSWs need to be reframed to steer public and political support towards the desired directions and to focus on health promotion programs targeting social determinants of FSWs' health.

Methods

The media could present a problem in distinctly different perspectives as they are influenced by their very nature, their knowledge of the problem, the preference of their target audience, and journalists' authority about what types of news to produce and how.^{8,10} Thus, it is necessary to have proper representation of the media in the analysis. For this paper, I decided to use only newspapers for two reasons: first, because newspapers are among the major media forms in Indonesia,¹⁴ and second, because of their availability for further analysis. In developing countries, newspaper archives or collections can be found in public libraries and have recently become easier to access, thanks to the Internet, which has helped newspaper articles become available online for a longer time compared to news from television, radio, or even magazines.¹⁵

I chose three newspapers for this study: *Jakarta Post*, *Koran Kompas*, and *Bali Post*. These represent three different types of newspapers circulated in Indonesia. *Jakarta Post* is a national English-language newspaper with a more liberal view,⁸ whereas *Koran Kompas* and *Bali Post*, which are written in Bahasa Indonesia, are more local in their content. *Koran Kompas* is a nationally circulated newspaper that covers various issues and has one of the biggest circulations in Indonesia.¹⁶ I selected *Bali Post* to represent provincial level (local) media because of two reasons: first, this newspaper is famous for its local campaign "ajeg Bali" or "safe Bali"¹⁷; and second, the fact that Bali experienced a significant increase in HIV prevalence among FSWs.¹³ These newspapers' electronic versions were searched for articles containing issues on the increasing HIV prevalence among FSWs by entering the keywords: sex work, prostitute, HIV, and AIDS.

I then systematically searched Scopus, Medline, and ProQuest for English-language peer-reviewed articles discussing the increasing trend of HIV prevalence among FSWs in Indonesia. I chose those three databases to obtain articles from different perspectives. The keywords "sex work or prostitute," "HIV or AIDS," and "rate or prevalence" were used.

The formal national report on the increasing trend of HIV prevalence among FSWs in Indonesia was first published in 2002; however, some provinces, including Bali, started conducting annual serological surveys in 2000.¹⁸ Hence, I limited the search for media and scholarly articles to the year 2000.

I used thematic analysis to examine how the media and scholarly articles framed the increasing trend of HIV prevalence among FSWs in Indonesia, following the procedure outlined by Liamputtong.¹⁹ I read each article to try to make sense of the data. Then, as part of a collective data set from the media data and from scholarly articles, I tried to make sense of what was presented by the media and scholarly journals as a group. To come up with main themes for the data, I developed initial codes and collated them into themes, as presented in the next sections.

Description of articles found in the media and scholarly journals

A total of 24 articles were found in the three newspapers: 8 in *Bali Post*, 10 in *Jakarta Post*, and 6 in *Koran Kompas*. Eight articles were obtained from peer-reviewed journals, mostly those related to STDs and HIV/AIDS.

Despite the fact that *Koran Kompas* and *Jakarta Post* are recognised as national newspapers, most of their articles related to the increasing HIV prevalence among FSWs were reports of provincial or district data. This suggests that these two newspapers' reporting of data from Bali, Papua, Batam, Jakarta, and Manado was determined by the availability of official data. The results of serological surveys conducted by the national and local governments were available only for the provinces that were covered by these newspapers' reports.^{13,20,21} None of the eight articles published by *Bali Post* contained national issues; all of them reported on Bali's experiences regarding the problem.

Meanwhile, the majority of scholarly articles based their discussion on national surveillance data. Only three articles were written based on provincial or district-level data; each of these articles reported data from Bali, Central Java, and Timika Papua.²²⁻²⁴ None of those three articles used surveillance data from the Ministry of Health or local governments; the authors used data from their own research.

What is the problem, and how urgent is it?

Both the media and scholarly articles acknowledged that the increasing trend in HIV prevalence among FSWs in Indonesia is a serious problem; however, they varied on how they framed the problem. The majority of articles published by the media used rhetoric as the main template in presenting the problem. *Bali Post* and *Koran*

Kompas routinely used words such as “*mengganas*,” “*menggila*,” “*menggelingding seperti bola salju*,” “*memprihatinkan*,” or “*mematikan*,” which in the English language refer to an “extremely alarming situation.” Those words also sometimes refer to an “unpreventable problem” or “deadly.” It is understandable why the media choose a negative template as they aim to attract their audience with fresh and captivating stories.¹⁰ In contrast, *Jakarta Post* was more cautious, using words such as “increasing” or “rising” to present the seriousness of the problem. It seems that *Jakarta Post* was more objective in reporting the problem than the two local-language newspapers.⁸

All the media articles linked the increasing trend in HIV prevalence among FSWs to the increasing number of HIV infections outside FSW groups; they regarded the high rate of HIV infection among FSWs as a bridge toward wider infection in the general population, including FSW clients, their spouses, and their children. This shows the potential of the media to increase their audience’s awareness of the problem. Many people in poor and developing countries still see HIV/AIDS as a disease of sinful people, such as FSWs or drug users; therefore, reporting that infection also occurs outside these groups challenges that view. Unfortunately, this framing could also cause harm to FSWs as the media could lead their audience’s perception toward victim blaming.⁸

To support their news reports related to the increasing trend in HIV prevalence among FSWs, almost all the media articles referred to statements from the government, university experts, and HIV/AIDS activists in NGOs. This practice could possibly lead to misreporting; for example, an article published by *Bali Post* on 2 December 2010 reported that 67% of FSWs in the Bung Tomo area in Denpasar were HIV-positive, which was horrifying news. However, the serological surveys conducted by the Bali Health Office reported only district-level data; it did not provide data on the brothel area. In 2010, the prevalence of HIV among FSWs in Denpasar was 22%.¹⁸ Only some articles from *Koran Kompas* and *Jakarta Post* clearly stated that their reports were based on formal surveillance reports published by health authorities.

Meanwhile, the scholarly articles seemed to be more careful in presenting the issue, tending to address it as a disease or a health problem by using epidemiological terminologies, such as “a significant increasing rate” and “the continuing growth of epidemic.”^{12,22-28} This is reasonable due to objective nature of epidemiological studies.²⁹

Similar to the media articles, the majority of scholarly articles state the increasing trend in HIV prevalence among FSWs as a favourable condition for accelerating the spread of HIV to the general population.^{12,23-27} The only exceptions were the articles by Ford et al.²² and Morineau et al.,²⁸ in which much of the focus was on the prevalence and incidence of HIV. In contrast, Jacobowski²⁵ highlighted the problem as a risk for married women, arguing that gender inequality and norms encourage men to have sexual experience, particularly with FSWs, before marriage. This condition, in addition to low knowledge of HIV among women in Indonesia, is a major determinant of vulnerability to HIV. Meanwhile, Ibrahim et al.²⁶ considered that the increasing trend in HIV prevalence would lead to the problem of accessing HIV-related care, which, they claimed, the health system was not yet ready to provide.

The causes of the problem

Aside from discussing the nature of the problem, both the media and scholarly articles also reported the causes of the problem. As is typical in academic research, the majority of scholarly articles presented a number of risk factors associated with the high rate of HIV infection among FSWs in Indonesia. The lack or inappropriateness of HIV-related knowledge; the low rate of consistent condom use, availability, and accessibility; and the high rate of STD infection were the significant factors associated with HIV vulnerability.^{22-24,27,28} Although the majority of scholarly articles included in analysis merely discussed more proximal risk factors, which are biological and behavioural factors, Riono and Jazant,¹² and Jacobowski²⁵ discussed more distal structural factors related to the problem. These authors claimed that stigma, poverty, gender inequality, culture, and religious norms could shape FSWs’ vulnerability to HIV.^{12,25}

Using a different perspective, *Koran Kompas* and *Bali Post* framed prostitution as the cause of the problem. In some of its articles, *Bali Post* referred to FSWs as “*daging mentah*,” which in English refers to the vulgar term “pussy,” and to the increasing number of “*kafe remang-remang*,” which refers to local nightclubs, as being responsible for the spread of the disease. They tended to blame the unsafe sexual behaviour practiced by FSWs and their clients, as well as the powerlessness of local governments to control prostitution. In the same vein, *Koran Kompas* blamed, but more subtly, the inadequate efforts of FSWs to decline clients who refuse to use condoms as the cause of the high HIV infection rate. They argued that FSWs and their pimps were afraid to lose business to competition as other FSWs or brothel complexes would still receive patrons who refuse to use condoms.

Interestingly, *Jakarta Post* took a different position from the other media, being far from conservative in presenting the causes of the problem. Although its news reports acknowledged low condom use as the main determinant of the high rate infection among FSWs, they showed much more concern for the causes of the

problem, which are the social determinants of the disease. In its articles, *Jakarta Post* framed cultural permissiveness, ignorance, poverty, and gender inequality – and not the lack of knowledge or awareness of HIV infection – as determinants of the weak position of FSWs, which leads to the high rate of HIV infection in this group. Moreover, the newspaper used term “3M,” which stands for “man, mobile, and money,” to frame the role of men in the high number of sexual transactions in Indonesia. *Jakarta Post* also claimed that the government has been reluctant to campaign for condom use as a prevention strategy and to implement 100% condom use in brothel complexes.

What or who is in charge of finding the solution?

The above discussion clearly shows that the scholarly journals’ presentation of the causes of the problem was restricted to the research design and objectives. Epidemiological studies focused their discussion on biological and behavioural factors,^{22-24,26-28} whereas social science studies concentrated more on the social determinants of the disease.^{12,25} Therefore, the solutions that these studies offered were also constrained by their respective focus.

Epidemiological studies constrained their discussion of solutions to addressing the biological and behavioural factors associated with the high rate of HIV infection among FSWs in Indonesia. The authors of these articles recommended intensive health education, close monitoring through informal sanctioned brothels, condom promotion, condom distribution, and strengthening of the health care system, especially PHCs, to provide STD- and HIV-related services. They argued that the government and communities should work together to ensure that these solutions are implemented.^{22-24,26-28}

Meanwhile, Riono and Jazant,¹² and Jacubowski²⁵ emphasised the importance of social factors in HIV prevention programs; both journal articles dealt more with the social aspect of public health. They stressed that the government should recognise and address the gender factors influencing HIV infection and that a health promotion strategy that would change unsafe sexual behaviours among men is crucial. To address those needs, they also emphasised the role of community leaders, especially from cultural and conservative religious groups.

Similarly to the scholarly articles, the media reports offered solutions based on their arguments as to the causes of the problem. *Bali Post* was more conservative than *Koran Kompas* and *Jakarta Post*, campaigning for “*ajeg Bali*” or a safe Bali by promoting local culture and religious norms.¹⁷ Hence, the solutions provided in the *Bali Post* articles were normative, such as the socialisation of HIV risks and the strengthening of religious faith to avoid nonmarital sexual activities. In some articles, *Bali Post* urged the local government to seriously control brothels and other potential places for sexual transactions; it also recommended shutting down red-light districts, which the newspaper itself admitted was hard to do. Like *Bali Post*, *Koran Kompas* was still reluctant to frame condom promotion as an effective strategy to prevent sexual transmission of HIV. The newspaper chose to promote the importance of health education for all, including FSWs, and emphasised the involvement of multi-sector agencies to facilitate this approach.

Written in English, a minority language in Indonesia, *Jakarta Post* offered different solutions compared to the other media. It framed the closing down of red-light districts as not a solution to the high rate of HIV infection among FSWs in Indonesia; instead, it argued that such policy will only increase the number of mobile FSWs. In addition, *Jakarta Post* reported that there are many champions of safe sex in FSW communities, sometimes even at the risk of physical abuse by patrons. It proposed that the intervention strategy should address this barrier by engaging stakeholders that are also involved in the business: pimps and patrons. The government could act as a facilitator by imposing their roles in informal sanctioned brothels and combating illegal ones.

Surprisingly, neither the scholarly articles nor the media included in the analysis prominently mentioned community empowerment as a solution to the social or structural problems of HIV prevention programs among FSWs in Indonesia. This approach has gained increasing popularity as an alternative to a repressive approach following the successful implementation of programs in Sanogachi, India and New Zealand.^{30,31} Community empowerment offers capacity building for communities to help FSWs identify and address, based on their resources and partnerships with relevant stakeholders, the social problems that impede their ability to force clients to use condoms.³² The newest national strategy to prevent sexual transmission of HIV has already included this approach as one of its pillar components.^{33,34}

Conclusions

The analysis of media articles showed that the focus in framing the problem and its risk factors is still dominantly influenced by biological and behavioural concepts. HIV/AIDS is considered more as a health problem resulting from unsafe behaviours that are inappropriate to the local culture and beliefs. *Bali Post* and *Koran Kompas* both framed prostitution as the cause of the increasing rate of HIV infection among FSWs and in the general population; this shows their reluctance to discuss connections between HIV, sexuality, and social problems, such as poverty and gender inequality. These newspapers tended to choose popular negative media templates in framing FSWs and prostitution, favouring the dominant cultural views in which FSWs are situated at the lowest place in society. In this case, writing positive articles about FSWs and their health problems would

be difficult.⁸

The analysis of *Jakarta Post* articles showed that this newspaper recognizes HIV/AIDS, sexuality, and the social factors behind them; however, because the articles are written in English, their ability to influence public perception is limited. Thus, efforts to challenge the dominant values by the involvement of local media should encourage local journalists, who write in Bahasa Indonesia, to be aware of the consequences of their chosen media template. HIV/AIDS is not merely a medical problem; it is a developmental problem.⁸ Evidence has shown that the spread of the infection is strongly associated with migration, poverty, gender inequality, political decision, and other social factors. Therefore, to effectively prevent HIV infection, those social problems should be tackled, and here the role of media in framing the problems and solutions appropriately is essential.³⁵

On the other hand, the fact that most of the scholarly articles included in the analysis focused more on the biological and behavioural factors of HIV infection indicates the need for more social research. The lack of social research or publication regarding the increasing rate of HIV infection among FSWs in Indonesia could be due to the complexity of the social problems involved; in addition, in terms of implementation research as well as monitoring and evaluation activities, a social approach is methodologically challenging.^{36,37} There is thus a need to determine which approaches are feasible, viable, and sustainable.³⁷

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