Non-Commercial Partner Relationships and HIV Risk among Female Sex Workers in Andhra Pradesh, India

Experience from Avahan: India AIDS Initiative

Increased attention is needed to address HIV risk and other vulnerabilities of FSWs that occur in non-commercial partner relationships.

Background

HIV prevention interventions in India have resulted in higher levels of consistent condom use among FSWs with commercial sex partners even while levels of consistent condom use with non-commercial sexual partners such as husbands, boyfriends, pimps, and police have remained lower. Non-commercial partners have been found to act both as protectors and as perpetrators of violence.

Although studies in other parts of the world have documented the role of non-commercial partnerships in increasing the vulnerability of FSWs to HIV due to low levels of condom use in these relationships, the impact of other effects of these relationships on HIV vulnerability of FSWs has not been studied and is less well understood. This present study examines the role of non-commercial partner relationships—especially those with a husband—on HIV vulnerability among FSWs in Andhra Pradesh, a southern state with the highest HIV burden in India.

Methods

Data were drawn from a cross-sectional behavioural and biological survey conducted in 2009 among 3,225 FSWs in Andhra Pradesh, India. The study included the following:

- Independent measures:
  - Presence of any non-commercial sexual partner (no, yes)
  - Nature of such partnerships (steady, unsteady)
- Study outcomes:
  - Experience of violence, practice of anal sex, inconsistent condom use with commercial partners
  - STI and HIV status
- Analysis:
  - Comparison of study outcomes by presence and nature of non-commercial partners
  - Use of multiple logistic regression models

Results

HIV prevalence was found to be higher among FSWs who did not have non-commercial partners compared to those who reported any non-commercial partner. FSWs who had non-commercial partners were more likely to have experienced physical violence in the past six months, forced sex in the past 12 months, and practiced anal sex in the past week. [See Table 1.]

FSWs with non-commercial partners who had unsteady relationships were more likely to be HIV positive; have experienced practice inconsistent condom use with occasional clients; have experienced physical violence in the past six months; have experienced forced sex in past 12 months; and have practiced anal sex in the past week. [See Table 2.]

Conclusions

Study findings show that although FSWs who have only commercial sex partners have a higher burden of HIV, other vulnerabilities are higher among those who have non-commercial partner relationships as well. While addressing FSWs with non-commercial partner relationships, vulnerabilities are significantly higher among those in unsteady relationships.

While HIV prevention efforts among FSWs should continue to focus on commercial sex, increased attention is needed to address HIV risk and other vulnerabilities of FSWs that occur in non-commercial partner relationships.

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