

Transgender and male homosexual sex workers



- Commercial transgender and male homosexual sex workers of India are a hyper-marginalized and invisible populace
- The sexuality, health and wellbeing of transgender and male sex workers have been rarely subjected to study
- The lack of information about sexual health behavior and decision-making among transgender and male sex workers hinders effective formulation of intervention programs directed at them

Study objectives



- The study intends to examine the sexual health belief, risk perception, and decision-making behavior of transgender and male commercial sex workers in India
- This is a pilot study for designing health interventions geared specifically towards the health needs of male and transgender commercial sex workers in India
- It is anticipated that the study will help to formulate future programmatic interventions that can cater more effectively to the health needs of the Indian male and transgender commercial sex worker population, contribute to HIV/STI risk reduction and increase positive health practices

Method



- The methodology utilized for this project involved the administration of a semi-structured interviewer led questionnaire
- While a guideline was used for questioning, the interviewees were also encouraged to articulate their opinion on issues within and outside the realm of interview questions
- IRB research approval was obtained from the PI's institution. Approval to conduct the project was also obtained from the State Ministry of Health, India. Permission to conduct the project was also obtained from Kolkata sex workers' union's central governing committee (DMSC)

Method



- The interviews were conducted at sex work sites including *Sonagachi* in Kolkata, *Garbhanga* of *Sheoraphuli*---a town in Hooghly district of West Bengal and *Kalna*, a town in Bardhaman district of West Bengal
- All communication took place in Bengali and the obtained interviews were transcribed and translated
- 38 respondents were interviewed
- A research assistant was employed to help with the interviewing, translating data from Bengali to English, and transcribing the obtained data

Findings



- The average age of interviewees was 29.2 years.
- The names provided by the sex workers were the pseudonyms that they used during the trade
- Of the 38 interviewees nine did not identify themselves as sex workers though they noted that they were having transactional sex with multiple partners
- Four primary themes identified by the author and validated by the research assistant emerged from data analysis of the transcribed interviews

Sexual identity among transgender and male sex workers



- Sexual identities and sexual behavior among male sex workers in India are fluid and not well-defined
- Seven interviewees classified themselves as “men who loved men”
- Twelve interviewees classified themselves specifically as transgenders and ten interviewees called themselves women but also said that they were biologically male
- The transgender respondents referred to themselves as a “third gender” which was neither male nor female but incorporated the characteristics of both.
- Five of the interviewees were married with children
- Two of the interviewees noted that they were biological hermaphrodites
- Six noted that they had surgically castrated themselves following the *Dai Nirvan*, the religious observance of castration performed within *hijras*

Risk awareness and condom compliance



- The interviewees were aware of the life threatening consequences of contracting HIV infection
- Of the 38 interviewees, 21 noted that they used condoms sporadically whereas 17 interviewees noted that they did not use condoms
- Of the 21 interviewees who used condoms regularly, only five used condoms consistently during relational sexual encounters.
- The rest 17 interviewees noted that they used condoms sporadically both during transactional and relational sex.
- Seven of the 16 interviewees noted that they did not use condoms with their long-term clients.
- Thirteen of the interviewees also noted that they did not use condoms with their intimate partners.
- None of the married male sex workers used condoms with their wives during vaginal sex.
- Reasons for not using condoms include disinclination of client or partner, non-availability of condoms, slippage and breakage

Contextual barriers in safe sex behavior: Stigmatization and violence



- Criminalization of sex work is a prevalent phenomenon in most parts of the globe--sex workers are not protected by law and are easily abused, oppressed and exploited by a variety of forces
- Violence is one of the primary contextual factors that significantly raise sex workers' HIV/AIDS and STI risk through being pressured by a client into unprotected sexual intercourse
- Thirty-two respondents noted that criminalization of their profession and stigmatization due to their sexual orientation limited their selection of clients and negotiation of sexual services to be provided.
- All of the interviewees observed that stigmatization was a recurrent and consistent factor in their lives and stigmatization often precipitated and exacerbated violence.
- Pressure to forego condoms was also high from intimate partners who often resorted to physical, verbal and psychological abuse

Sexual health screening and testing



- Of the 38 interviewees 13 had undergone regular screening/testing and five had undergone regular screening/testing at the facilities
- Twenty of the interviewees reported that they have not undergone screening/testing though all were aware of the availability of screening/testing facilities
- The reasons for not availing screening/testing were noted to be a) fear of being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS by screening/testing b) stigma attached with STI positivity
- Stigmatization and marginalization not only occurred in their families but was actively precipitated by their own community members

Lack of a community platform and resulting voicelessness



- The involvement of male and transgender sex workers in the sex workers' union DMSC appeared to be significantly less than female sex workers
- They comprised less than 1% of administrative positions of the union and generally did not run elections for representation in the governing body
- A significant section of male and transgender sex workers are transient. 21 of the respondents said their areas of work changed frequently and they had no fixed place of operation
- All interviewees talked about divisions and lack of unified representation on the sex workers' platform as well as negligible community support

Conclusion



- The sexual identity of male sex workers in India is fluid and cannot be rigidly defined
- Interviewed sex workers are aware of the risks of infection from unprotected sex
- Yet they indulge in high-risk sexual behavior, consistently low and erratic condom use, and have high STI/HIV infections
- Violence and stigmatization served as contextual barriers to health, stigmatization was intersectional and multi-layered
- Male and transgender sex workers unlike females are transient and non-brothel-based
- Community support among male and transgender sex workers was perceived to be low, with negligible representation on the sex workers' coalition
- The findings of the current study can help to reduce the gap in information about sexual health belief, knowledge, behavior and health outcomes of a high risk population and form a foundation for basing future studies in similar population groups.