“All in the name of love”: Understanding the Relationship between Sex Workers and their Intimate Partners

Findings from participatory research in north Karnataka, India

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OBJECTIVE

To understand the drivers of violence and condom use in the relationship between sex workers and their intimate partners

METHODS

The study was conducted in two separate, three-day residential workshops with 31 female sex workers (FSWs) and 37 intimate partners (IPs).

TOOLS

The study used five Participatory Learning and Action tools with FSWs and six tools with IPs:

• "Exploratory Tools" were used for observation and reflection on experiences
• Symbols
• Venn Diagram
• Hopes and Fears
• "Analysis Tools" were used to explore relationships, and identify linkages and perceptions
• Octopus Diagram
• Problem Tree
• Balot Box

The writings, drawings and other outputs from the tools were analysed and interpreted along with the FSWs and IPs. Their comments and observations during each of the analyses sessions were noted.

WORKSHOP PROCESS

WITH FSWs

• FSWs initially used the logo of a pen, drawing and expressing their views on a paper chalking.
• Hence, preferred verbal expression to drawings.
• Some of them started using pen and paper on the second day, which motivated and encouraged others to do the same.
• Most of them preferred one-to-one sharing with facilitators than in a group especially on the topic of condom use.
• They became more comfortable to share on issues of violence, hopes and fears in a group by the second day.

WITH IPs

• IP groups were divided on the basis of their age and marital status to ensure some degree of homogeneity and make them feel comfortable.
• Most IPs had higher literacy levels and preferred writing about their experiences rather than expressing through drawings.
• They were also more open to group discussions.
• They appreciated the workshop as they rarely got an opportunity to discuss about their feelings.

FINDINGS

Perception of self and intimate partner (FSW respondents)

• Most FSWs’ relationships with their IPs were marked by signs of insecurity, fear and violence although they described love as the foundation of these relationships.
• Most FSWs perceived their IPs as ‘husband-like’, and their relationship with them as equivalent to a marital relationship.

Ideal images of the relationship

Intimate Partners

“Both my wife and my lover have to be loyal to me. If I ever come to know that my lover is going with other men, I will kill her.”

Married 3P, 25 years

• Images showed that both wives and FSW lovers were expected to be loyal, possess a good character, dress ‘decently’ and be caring.
• Images showed that duties of caring for children and family were expected of wives and not of lovers.
• FSW lovers were expected primarily to provide sexual satisfaction, pleasure and even romance.

Female Sex Workers

“When he is with his wife, he does not respond to my calls as he fears his wife and parents will come to know that he had called. He calls me when he comes out. He lies. He only says that he was at the bus stop and does not openly say that I am at my wife’s place. This behaviour reflects my trust as I know for sure that he has with his wife.”

FSW, 25 years

For FSWs, ideal IPs were those who:
• were responsible for their children
• cared for the FSWs’ parents in their old age
• publicly acknowledged FSWs as their wives
• accompanied them to the temple
• treated FSWs and wives alike

Violence and conflict

Female Sex Workers

“I had gone for training for 3-4 days; he asked me where I had gone, and whom I met and what did I do there. He was not satisfied with my answer so he asked me to prove my love towards him by putting my hand in the boiling oil. He said if my hand does not burn, then only I will mean I truly love him.”

FSW, 33 years

• A sense of superiority gave IPs sanction to use violence over the FSWs.
• Suspicion and mistrust triggered violence in these relationships.

Condom use in the relationship

Female Sex Workers

“My intimate partner does not get satisfaction if I use a condom. He says that he is my regular partner and hence has no need to have sex with me without a condom.”

FSW, 20 years

Non use of condoms were due to:
• Deep love and trust in their partner
• Fear of actual violence and harassment from partners

Intimate Partners

“I have used condom with my lover when I used to go to her as a client. But now that I am her lover, I do not feel the necessity to use condoms as I trust that she will not have sex with anyone else other than me.”

IP, 36 years

Non use of condoms were due to:
• Non use being considered a privilege as intimacy and love made it superior to client–sex worker relationships
• Trust and love
• Perception of condoms as a barrier to sexual pleasure and as being cumbersome

Fears and hopes in the relationship

Female Sex Workers

FSWs had various fears, including:
• losing their partner or violence
• being caught by their partner while entertaining clients
• contracting diseases such as HIV from their IPs

Despite the fears and presence of violence in these relationships, FSWs hope for a romantic future where the intimate partners would love them and look after them forever or till the end.

Intimate Partners

IPs had various fears, including:
• estrangement and breakdown of their relationship with their FSW lover
• estrangement leading to alcohol addiction, or causing them to become violent with their FSW lovers
• being compelled to use condoms, while others feared contracting HIV from their FSW lovers

IPs also hoped for a romantic future with their FSW lovers. Some hoped to marry them, have children and live together with them forever.

CONCLUSION

- Intimate partner relationships characterised by low use of condoms and high incidence of violence pose high risk for HIV infection among sex workers.
- Programmes to prevent HIV among FSWs must recognise the complex nature of intimate partner relationships, as distinct from commercial, paid relationships and need to include interventions with their IPs.
- High risk in these relationships comes from prevalent social and cultural norms around gender roles, masculinity, fidelity and the acceptance of violence against women.
- Prevention efforts must centre around empowerment of women, transformation of social and cultural norms around what it means to be a man and ending the acceptance of violence against women.

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