

Sex Workers as Targets of and Agents for HIV/STI Prevention

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Sex Work

Sex work is defined as a mutually agreed exchange of sexual services for money, services, goods, protection or other privileges ...

Sex in the context of the sex industry may have different meanings and functions...

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Sex Work May Mean...

- **Viabile economic endeavor for those in the trade**
- **A power struggle between worker and client**
- **A mechanism that serves to sanction social constructs about male sexuality**

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Sex Work May Mean...

- **An aberrant way “*to protect the virtue*” of some women by debasing/stigmatizing other women**

An ideal sexual outlet in societies with double standards...

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Sex Work May Mean...

- A survival strategy for disadvantaged women and oftentimes their offspring...



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The Sex Worker...

“...the [commercial sex worker] comes to function as both the most literal of slaves and as the most subversive of sexual agents within a sexist social order”

(Wendy Chapkis, 1997)



At risk or risky?

Why is this group so critical?

The traditional view:

- **A “core group” on the loose in the streets**
- **“Conduits for”, “vectors of” STI/HIV**
- **Unruly, hard to approach**
- **A “social ill” to be eradicated**

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At risk or risky?

A contemporary view:

- **Heterogeneous group in varied locations**
- **Highly vulnerable population, strongly affected**
- **Usually poor, uneducated and powerless**
- **Trade or service occupation still on margins**

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The many faces of sex work

- Driven by economic hardship, inequities
- Variety of contexts (brothels, streets, bars)
- Independent entrepreneurs, broker-mediated, pimp-controlled, establishments

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The many faces of sex work

- Social status
- Control over working conditions
- Experiences at work
- Adjustment to their work
- Impact on the community

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Increased risk and augmented vulnerability

- **Multiple Sex Partners** (Median in Guyana study 3 clients/day-night. Similar results in other studies, 18 per week)
- **High Frequency of Sexual Contacts**
- **Increased Odds of Condom Breakage** (study in Spain reports 1-2 events/100 intercourse episodes)
- **Unprotected Sexual Intercourse with Regular Partners** (in Guyana study around 90% sometimes or never)

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An affected population

The impact is not the same for all...

- In a study in Guyana 46% HIV+
- In Jamaica (1995) prevalence in CSW 11%
- In Dominican Republic (1998) an average of 5.5% (3.3% 7 years before). In some sites up to 10%

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An affected population

- In Mexico (1995) prevalence of HIV+ 0.35% in a sample in which 43% Bacterial Vaginosis
- In Honduras (1998) prevalence among CSW in average 10%
- In Peru, Colombia and Ecuador around 2%

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Individual Behavior...

- If consistent use of condoms is all it takes to reduce the increasing prevalence

Why not promote it?

Women reporting condom use with clients have lower rates of HIV, HBV, other infections...

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Individual Behavior Or Social Context?

- Consistent use of condoms seems a very easy to adopt strategy, right?

Well, not very much so...

- Visibility and accessibility are the first concerns
- Then, the lack of a supportive environment

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Individual Behavior And Social Context!

- Work with them not for them, but beware of misuse/abuse of “silver bullets”
- Identify trustworthy sources of information and reliable sources for support
- Identify structural barriers and foster collective action to overcome them

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Individual Behavior And Social Context!

- Health promotion and preventive strategies among CSWs should be community-oriented
- To reduce risks and hazards in sex work it is critical to talk about **SEXUALITY** and to revise dysfunctional patterns, mores, traditions, roles...

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Individual Behavior And Social Context!

- CSWs should be both target and actors of health promotion and preventive strategies
- To protect the well being of their clients is important, but they are also important as members of our society

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“Whereas the sex trade is becoming increasingly modern, cell phones, web sites and all that stuff, the working conditions of women in the business still resemble the 19th. Century... It is time to do something”

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