

High Prevalence of HIV and Syphilis amongst Female Sex Workers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa Point to Prevention Needs to Reduce Transmission Risks



Zamakayise Kose, Mfezi Mcingana, Amrita Rao, Andrew Lambert, Sheree Schwartz, Nancy Phaswana-Mafuya, Stefan Baral

Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa, TB HIV Care Association (THCA), Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, TB HIV Care Association (THCA), Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

BACKGROUND

Female Sex Workers (FSW) across South Africa have consistently been shown to have disproportionately high prevalence of HIV and STIs given a range of individual, network level, and structural HIV risk determinants. Even in the context of emerging HIV prevention approaches such as universal HIV treatment and pre-exposure prophylaxis, consistent condom usage remains important. Consequently, the analyses reported here explore the reported condom usage by FSW in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and their exposure to syphilis and HIV infection.

METHODS

A total of 410 FSW were recruited using respondent-driven sampling (RDS) between Oct 2014-Mar 2015. Participants completed an interviewer-administered questionnaire asking about condom usage with different types of sexual partners. Women received HIV testing and counselling and rapid plasma reagin (RPR) testing for syphilis. Groups were compared using Chi-squared statistics and Wilcoxon-rank sums tests.

RESULTS

Overall 63.7% of FSW tested HIV positive and 20.3% tested positive for syphilis. Among HIV negative FSW, 20.8% tested positive for syphilis. The RDS-adjusted estimate for HIV was 63.0% [95% CI 56.7-69.3] and 17.1% [95% CI 12.1-22.1] for syphilis. Condom use, total sex acts, and number of recent clients were comparable between those with and without active syphilis. Condom use differed by partner type: among those living with HIV and syphilis, condom use was 80% with new and regular clients, but just 44% with casual partners and 15% with long-term partners. Known HIV status was not associated with higher levels of condom use with long-term partners ($p=0.225$).

CONCLUSIONS

High rates of untreated syphilis were common and indicate a need for integration of syphilis screening within HIV prevention and testing programs for FSW, as well as the risks of onward transmission within sexual networks with low condom use. The burden of active syphilis among HIV negative FSW further demonstrates the high ongoing risk for HIV acquisition within this population.

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