

ABSTRACT

Sexual Decision Making and HIV Vulnerability among Female Sex Workers in Jamaica: A Qualitative Study

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Public Health problems including the HIV epidemic are most effectively addressed through interventions among those most at risk. The Jamaica National HIV/STI programme statistics (2012) reveal that 15% of adults with HIV reported having sex with a sex worker. HIV prevalence among female sex workers (FSWs) was 4.1% in 2012 compared to a 1.7% in the general population. Prevention interventions among FSW have existed in Jamaica for over 20 years; however little research has been done on the economic, socio-cultural and personal factors affecting sexual behaviours and sexual decision making (SDM) in this group.

Qualitative research using the constructivist grounded theory approach was applied in answering the research question what is the role of SDM and risk perception in the adoption of HIV/STI risk reduction practices among FSWs in the context of the Jamaican sex trade? Data collected through semi-structured interviews with FSWs, their clients, main partners and facilitators of sex work was analysed guided by a framework for SDM developed by Bailey and Figueroa (2014).

The findings revealed that FSWs experience physical and psychological hazards of the sex trade including violence, stigma and HIV/STI infection. They cope by carrying weapons, using alcohol and other drugs, through peer support and using condoms.

Decisions about sexual behaviours among FSWs particularly in relation to condom use are not always based on accurate risk perception. Violence, drug use and partner status served as barriers to consistent condom use. However relationship intimacy with clients and main partners exerted the greatest influence in SDM.

Keywords: Althea Bailey; female sex workers; HIV risk; sexual decision making.