



“No Party Hat, No Party”: Successful Condom Use in Sex Work in Mexico and the Dominican Republic

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Abstract: Sex workers and their clients are particularly vulnerable to HIV/STI transmission. Most research on condom use has focused on barriers preventing use; less is known about attitudes, motivations and strategies employed by those who feel positively about condoms and who use them successfully. For this qualitative study, we conducted focus group discussions with sex workers (14), both female and transvestite, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and female sex workers (17) and male clients (11) in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, who identified themselves as successful condom users in a condom use questionnaire. Discussions explored definitions of successful condom use, motivations and strategies for condom use and messages for future condom promotion. Sex workers defined successful condom use as being in agreement with their clients and partners about using condoms, protecting themselves from disease and unwanted pregnancy, and feeling good about using condoms. Condoms were seen to be hygienic, offer protection and provide a sense of security and peace of mind. Specific strategies included always having condoms on hand, stressing the positive aspects of condoms and eroticising condom use. Future educational messages should emphasise condom use to protect loved ones, increase security and pleasure during sex, and demonstrate respect for both sex workers, clients and partners. © 2006 Reproductive Health Matters. All rights reserved.

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THE World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are 38 million new cases of curable sexually transmitted infections (STIs) each year in the Latin America and Caribbean region.¹ In 2005, the number of people living with HIV in the region was estimated at 2.1 million.² In Mexico and the Dominican Republic, where the study reported here took place, unprotected sex between sex workers and their clients often translates into high HIV and STI rates.^{3–6}

The Dominican Republic has a high number of people in the sex trade per capita, with some 50,000 female sex workers in Santo Domingo alone. A 2005 Ministry of Health study reported

that HIV prevalence among Santo Domingo sex workers was 3%, compared to 1.7% in the general adult population.^{4,7}

In Mexico, national HIV prevalence is 0.3% in the general adult population, 0.5% among female sex workers, and 6.1% among male sex workers.^{2,3} In Ciudad Juarez, at the US–Mexico border, sex workers regularly engage in high-risk sex with clients, including thousands of truck drivers carrying freight across the border. Violence and lawlessness are rife; the city has seen the abduction, rape, murder and disappearance of up to 600 Ciudad Juarez women in the past decade, likely including sex workers.⁸

Research on condom use among sex workers and clients typically looks at barriers to condom use and risk factors that predispose to non-use. A recent qualitative study of female sex workers in the Mexican border city of Tijuana identified three major barriers to condom use: personal dislike of condoms, negative client reactions to condoms and financial incentives offered by clients for sex without a condom.⁵ Street-based female sex workers in Mexico City reported high levels of condom use with clients (94%), but 73% never used condoms with their romantic partners, a finding that underscores the challenge of promoting safer sex in both the professional and private lives of sex workers.⁹

Yet, there remains a scarcity of information on what differentiates successful condom users from inconsistent and non-users.¹⁰ The concept of positive deviance is particularly relevant to addressing these knowledge gaps, in this case learning what the enabling factors are that motivate the relatively few individuals who do use condoms in order to develop successful condom promotion campaigns.^{11,12}

Sexual health researchers have long struggled to define and measure the concept of "successful condom use", for which there is no universally accepted definition. For example, in some cases, successful condom use has been defined by researchers as using condoms with *all* partners in the past six months, but condom users themselves may define success as using condoms 100% of the time with secondary partners but less frequently with primary partners.

NGO partners working with sex workers in Santo Domingo and Ciudad Juarez

We decided to conduct this study in the Dominican Republic and Mexico based partly on the interests of donors and partly due to the encouragement of local NGOs with whom the Population Council has worked on previous projects. In Santo Domingo, we worked with the Centro de Orientación e Investigación Integral (COIN), which since the 1980s has worked with local sex workers to establish a network of peer health educators, develop and distribute educational materials and implement HIV prevention activities. Their educational materials featuring a Dominican sex worker called *Maritza* have been particularly successful as a peer education tool

in addressing strategies such as negotiating and eroticising condom use with clients, refusing drunk, high or violent clients and keeping the client interaction as safe as possible for the sex worker.^{6,13} COIN was also influential in the formation of the Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas (MODEMU), a Dominican sex worker union run entirely by sex workers for sex workers, with whom we also worked to develop the current study protocol and instruments.

In Ciudad Juarez, we worked with the Federación Mexicana de Asociaciones Privadas de Salud y Desarrollo Comunitario (FEMAP), a health and community development NGO that has been operating for nearly 40 years. FEMAP has long experience working with female and male sex workers, particularly street-based sex workers, to educate them about HIV prevention, offer health referrals, provide condoms, address substance abuse and encourage transition out of sex work using grounded, respectful approaches. FEMAP put us in touch with a small group of sex workers who reviewed study plans and instruments during the design stage.

Methodology and participants

The research involved two components: first, the development and administration of a condom user scale that attempted to bring us closer methodologically to the meanings of successful condom use, and second, a qualitative exploration of the definitions of and conditions for successful condom use with a subset of respondents to the condom use scale.

Potential participants were screened to identify those meeting eligibility requirements (sexually active and had ever used condoms). Eligible participants then responded to a questionnaire with statements on condom use, attitudes towards condoms, positive and negative experiences with condoms, and beliefs about condoms. The questionnaire contained a 93-point scale for sex workers and a 75-point scale for male clients. A few questions were included from both the Sexual Relationship Power Scale¹⁴ and Sunmola's scale for measuring barriers to condom use.¹⁵ And questions were added on frequency of condom slippage and breakage, how much participants agreed or disagreed with statements about the benefits of condoms, and whether condoms interfered with the enjoyment

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