



The role of housing in determining HIV risk among female sex workers in Andhra Pradesh, India: Considering women's life contexts

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ABSTRACT

Recent research on HIV prevention, regardless of the population, has increasingly recognized the relevance of contextual factors in determining HIV risk. Investigating such factors among female sex workers (FSW) is especially relevant in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where HIV rates are among the highest across Indian states and where HIV has largely affected FSW. Stable housing is a particular contextual challenge experienced by female sex workers in this region (as well as elsewhere); however, local studies have not examined the impact of this issue on HIV risk. In this paper, we examine residential instability, defined as a high frequency of reported evictions, among FSW and relation to experiences of violence (as a factor increasing risk for HIV) and sexual risk factors for HIV. Women were recruited through respondent-driven sampling for a survey on HIV risk. Using logistic regression models, we assessed: (1) residential instability and association with HIV sexual risk variables (including unprotected sex, reported STIs, and recent physical and sexual victimization) and (2) whether the association between residential instability and reported STI (as an indicator of HIV risk) was attenuated by individual risk behaviors and violence. In adjusted logistic regression models, FSW who reported residential instability were more likely to report: sexual violence, physical violence, accepting more money for unprotected sex, and a recent STI symptom. Violence associated with residential instability contributed to reported STIs; however, residential instability remained significantly associated with STIs beyond the influence of both violence and unprotected sex with clients. Findings highlight the interrelation among residential instability, violence, and HIV risk. Residential instability appears to be associated with women's HIV risk, above and beyond its association with individual risky sexual behaviors.

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Introduction

There is growing recognition of the importance of social and environmental context as relevant to determining risk for HIV (Evans & Lambert, 2008; Ghose, Swendeman, George, & Chowdhury, 2008; Shahmanesh, Patel, Mabey, & Cowan, 2008). Factors such as incarceration, unemployment and homelessness have been identified among various vulnerable groups within the US and abroad as increasing risk for HIV (Adimora & Schoenbach, 2002; Adimora et al., 2006; Gardezi et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2009; Raj et al., 2008; Wenzel, Tucker, Elliott, & Hambarsoomians, 2007). Building on this work, recent studies have documented several structural factors as relevant to HIV risk, even when adjusting for the effect of individual unprotected sex behaviors (Adimora et al., 2006; Raj et al.,

2008). These studies have suggested that contexts are associated with HIV risk partly through their influence on individual behaviors; however, these recent findings also suggest that sexual risk for HIV is greater among those most vulnerable to certain risky social or environmental contexts, regardless of their individual risky behaviors.

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in attention to female sex workers (FSW) in India and elsewhere, as a result of the expanding HIV epidemic. The southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh is among the Indian states with the highest rates for HIV and where FSW are one of the primary populations who are affected (National AIDS Control Organization, 2005; National AIDS Control Organization, 2007; Steen, Mogasale, Wi, Singh, Das, Daly et al., 2006). More elevated rates of HIV infection exist among FSW in the region of coastal Andhra Pradesh where recent survey assessments have indicated the highest rates in India (Ramesh, Moses, Washington, Isac, Mohapatra, Mahagaonkar et al., 2008). Coastal Andhra Pradesh, a commercially developed region of the

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state with various industries (agricultural, fishery etc.), affords a range of clients for FSW including businessmen, travelers, and those within the transport sector (e.g. truck drivers, bus, and taxi). Clients within the transport sector, often referred to as a “bridge” population, have received much attention as their mobility has implications for the expanding HIV epidemic in this region (Chandrasekaran et al., 2006; O’Neil et al., 2004). Given the high rates of HIV risk, particularly pertaining to sex work in the region, it is important to examine factors that increase vulnerability to HIV among FSW in coastal Andhra Pradesh. In light of the multitude of likely challenges within the social and environmental contexts (i.e. aspects of home and work life) of FSW, research is needed that delineates how such contexts may relate to risk for HIV generally, as well as HIV risk behaviors (Ntumbanzondo, Dubrow, Niccolai, Mwandagalirwa, & Merson, 2006; Saggurti, Verma, RamaRao, Jain, Singh, Mahendra et al., 2008).

One risk factor for HIV, of particular importance among populations of FSW, is women’s experiences of violence. Extensive research has documented the relation between violence and increased vulnerability to HIV among FSW in multiple global settings (Cler-Cunningham & Christerson; 2001; Gupta, Raj, Decker, Reed, & Silverman, in press; Rekart, 2005; Sarkar, Bal, Mukherjee, Chakraborty, Saha, & Ghosh, 2008; Schunter, 2001; Thukral & Ditmore, 2003; Wojcicki & Malala, 2001; World Health Organization, 2003). Further, more recent studies have shown that aspects of social and environmental context (e.g. neighborhood characteristics, home environment, peer networks) contribute to women’s risk for experiencing violence (Reed, Amaro, Matsumoto, & Kaysen, 2009; Reed, Silverman et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2008; Reed, Silverman, Welles, Santana, Missmer, & Raj, 2009). Altogether, the high rates of violence experienced among FSW in India and elsewhere, the increased risk for HIV resulting from such violence, as well as the contribution of challenges within one’s life context to risk for experiencing violence, showcase the importance of considering violence as an indicator for HIV risk among populations of FSW.

More recent work related to the investigation of contextual factors in relation to HIV risk has shown that housing instability is associated with HIV risk (Aidala, Lee, Abramson, Messeri, & Siegler, 2007; Song, Safaeian, Strathdee, Vlahov, & Celentano, 2000); lack of stable housing is a particular contextual challenge experienced by FSW in India and globally. Specific to Rajahmundry (as well as other areas within India), because of gender norms, renting from a landlord may be difficult if no husband or male partner is present. Additionally, women in the current study have often reported to research staff (through personal communication) that they may be evicted if a landlord becomes aware that they are sex workers. Financial gain from sex work also requires that women are able to work regularly; women who get sick or who are unable to work may have periods of time where they cannot pay rent or housing costs. Sex workers in this region are often among the poorest women who do not have other sources of economic support (family or spouses), with the majority of women reporting current debts (Reed, Gupta, Biradavolu, Devireddy, & Blankenship, 2010). Overall, this population of sex workers appears extremely vulnerable to a range of related instabilities; securing and maintaining housing appears to be an important challenge in women’s lives, yet little work has been done to understand how this challenge may be relevant to women’s HIV risk.

Unstable housing likely contributes to conditions that promote risky and unprotected sex trades that ultimately increase risk for HIV as well as violence. FSW who have unstable living circumstances or who become homeless, particularly among FSW who also care for children, may be more likely to agree to riskier sex trades (e.g. taking more money for sex without condoms) or face situations where they may be at increased risk of violence (e.g.

traveling alone to meet client(s) may afford more money but greater risk for violence). While such scenarios may provide greater financial gains that may help provide better living situations, they also have implications for increasing women’s sexual risks for HIV. Being evicted from housing may also place women at greater risk for violence if they become homeless or have to reside in places where they may be less safe (e.g. with male partners).

Despite the likely pervasiveness of such challenges related to housing among this population and the likely association to HIV risk, very little work has examined the relation between residential instability and HIV-related risk factors among FSW in India and elsewhere. To date, studies among other non-FSW populations have documented a significant association between residential instability and HIV risk (Elifson, Sterk, & Theall, 2007; Sevelius, Reznick, Hart, & Schwarcz, 2009). Existing work among FSW includes one study in India among FSW in Goa which suggests that instability related to location of work and residence may lead to social and professional isolation that may cause concerns for increased HIV risk (Shahmanesh et al., 2009). Studies in the US among FSW have linked homelessness to increased sexual risk for HIV (Surratt & Inciardi, 2004) and to increased experiences of victimization from violence (El-Bassel, Witte, Wada, Gilbert, & Wallace, 2001); however these studies have not examined other forms of *unstable* housing (i.e. studies have focused on homelessness but have not examined largely other types of instabilities around housing). More work is needed to investigate whether instability related to housing has an impact on HIV risk among FSW, and particularly, in this region of high HIV prevalence within India.

Existing work, therefore, underscores the importance of investigating the relevance of residential instability to increased risk for HIV, including association with experiences of violence, and whether violence, in turn, further increases sexual risk for HIV. Also, given recent findings suggesting that unstable environments, regardless of incidents of unprotected sex, are influential in determining risk for HIV (Adimora et al., 2006; Raj et al., 2008), it is important to examine how residential instability relates to sexual risk behaviors, but also, how such instability may operate on risk in other ways, for example, by increasing exposure to contexts where HIV risk may be greater (e.g. different social networks).

The purpose of the current study is to examine residential instability, defined as a high frequency of reported evictions, among FSW and its association with experiences of violence and sexual risk factors for HIV. Specifically, the current study will analyze: (1) the association of residential instability with risk factors for HIV, including individual risk behaviors (e.g. unprotected sex trades), experiences of violence, and recent STI symptoms, and (2) whether residential instability remains associated with recent reports of STIs (indicators of HIV risk) (Fleming & Wasserheit, 1999; Wasserheit, 1999) even after accounting for its association with unprotected sex trades and experiences of violence among FSW. While we measure residential instability at the individual level in this study, we consider housing instability as a “contextual factor” insofar as it relates to environment rather than individual behavior.

Methods

Procedure and sample

Quantitative data for the current cross-sectional study were collected from March 30, 2007 to May 30, 2007, as part of Project Parivartan, an evaluation of a community mobilization intervention, among those implemented via the Avahan India AIDS Initiative across six Indian states. Parivartan aims to assess the impact of the intervention on reductions in vulnerability and HIV risk among female sex workers in Rajahmundry, within the East Godavari

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