

Mobile phone based intervention for high-risk Indian MSM sex workers: Could this be an effective tool for improvements in communication towards sexual risk reduction?

Beena E Thomas¹, Karikalan N¹, Katie Bello^{2,3}, Pandiaraja N¹, Balaguru S¹, Mathew Mimiaga^{2,3,4}

Background: Power differentials impede sex workers' ability to communicate about and negotiate safer sex with clients, potentiating HIV transmission risk. Male sex workers increasingly use mobile phones as a networking tool globally. We therefore examined the efficacy of a novel mobile phone based harm reduction intervention among MSM sex workers in Chennai, India for sexual risk reduction. This paper presents the impact of the intervention to improve sexual communication towards safer sex and condom use negotiation-important components towards sexual risk reduction.

Methodology: A pilot randomized control trial was conducted in Chennai, India with 100 MSM sex workers. Participants were equally randomized to intervention and standard of care (SOC) arms. The intervention are included two face-to-face individual HIV risk reduction counseling sessions, two mobile phone sessions with daily personalized text messages/voice mail with messages for reducing risky sexual behavior. The intervention (format and topics) was developed using a community participatory approach. The language used was their code words (For ex: chocolate for condom- "Do not forget to use chocolate.") Assessments using a semi structured interview schedule were done baseline, three and six-month follow up.to assess the impact of the intervention on sexual risk reduction.

Results: Two third of participants self identified as kothis (effeminate males), 52% were <25 years, 38% lived with a male partner and 4% with a female partner or wife. At six-month follow up a significantly larger proportion of participants in the intervention arm reported improvement in sexual communication (not being lured into unsafe sex) 25% vs. 8% and being able to negotiate condom use with their clients as compared to the SOC group (94% vs. 75%): p <0.05].

Conclusion: Findings suggest that mobile phone intervention hold potential for enhancing HIV prevention efforts in MSM sex work settings and should be further explored.

Implications to Social Work practice: It is important that social workers equip themselves with innovative creative interintervention strategies when addressing sexual risk reduction among sensitive populations such as male sex workers. Furthermore it is important that any intervention proposed has to be developed using a community participatory approach in order to be effective.

1 – National Institute for Research in Tuberculosis (NIRT), Chennai, India

2 – The Fenway Institute, Fenway Health, Boston, US Hospital, Dept. of Psychiatry, Boston, US

3 – Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, Dept. of Epidemiology, Boston, US.

4 – Harvard Medical School / Massachusetts General Hospital, Dept of Psychiatry, Boston, US

Funding:Indo-US Joint Working Group (R21)