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Context and dynamics of male-to-male sexual behavior of truckers in India: Findings from a multi-site qualitative research study

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RESEARCH

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CONTEXT AND DYNAMICS OF MALE-TO-MALE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR OF TRUCKERS IN INDIA: Findings from a multi-site qualitative research study

Background

It is well established that truckers (drivers and helpers) have higher rates of non-marital sex than any other occupational group (New Era 2002, Rao et al 1994). Because of this multi-partner sexual activity, viewed as 'high-risk' behavior, truckers form a key group for HIV/STI prevention efforts. Thus far, HIV/STI prevention interventions for truckers have been geared to providing risk-reduction information and services within a heterosexual context. Recent evidence, though anecdotal, suggests that a large number of truckers engage in male-to-male (MSM) sexual activity which has serious implications for HIV/STI transmission. Current literature on patterns of MSM activities in India, mostly from urban areas, includes little mention of truckers and other non-urban sectors of Indian society. Therefore, information on the nature and extent of MSM activity among these populations is urgently needed for the design and implementation of comprehensive prevention programs for truckers.

The Transport Corporation of India Foundation (TCIF), under the aegis of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's *Avahan* Project, is implementing Project *Kavach* to reduce HIV/STI vulnerability in 1.5 million truckers and their partners. The main intervention in this project is the provision of syndromic treatment for STIs and behavioral change communication messages through *Khushi* Clinics at selected halt points.

TCIF recognizes that its efforts are largely aimed at heterosexual behavior of truckers and do not adequately address MSM activities and related HIV risk. To design appropriate HIV/STI preventive strategies, TCIF requested the Population Council to undertake an exploratory study to fill in the gaps in the existing knowledge about the sexual behavior of truckers. Some of the key questions to be explored were: Who are the male partners of truckers? What is the risk involved in their sexual activities? What are the risk perceptions and associated factors that influence same sex behaviors of truckers? What are the programmatic and research implications of same sex behaviors among truckers?

Study Methodology

A careful review of the existing literature, both published and unpublished, on sexual behavior and HIV/STI vulnerability among truckers was carried out. The desk-based review was followed by systematic field work at five major halt points of truckers in Azadpur Mandi (Delhi), Chandausi (Uttar Pradesh), Ichhapuram (Andhra Pradesh), Neelmangala (Karnataka) and Surat (Gujarat). Outreach workers from TCIF were trained to conduct a total of 32 in-depth interviews with drivers and their helpers who reported that they engaged in MSM activities. In addition, 39 key informant interviews and 11 focus group discussions were conducted with drivers, helpers, brokers and the other allied populations found at the halt points. Wherever

possible and with informed consent, interviews were conducted with the male sex partners of truckers.

Salient Findings

The findings of qualitative research undertaken suggest that MSM activity among truckers is fairly widespread. Many different types of male sex partners are involved and the locations and situations for MSM activities are extremely diverse. Several truckers expressed a strong compulsion to engage in same sex activities and mentioned various reasons for doing so. One common response to the question as to why they engaged in sex with other men was "...when there is less availability of females for sex." Many drivers and helpers proactively sought out other men for sex. Another reason given was "women are carriers of HIV and therefore unsafe." Anal sex with men was not only described as safe but also pleasurable.

MSM activity between drivers and *khalasis* (helpers) was strongly affected by the power relationship between them as *khalasis* are extremely dependent on the truck drivers. Sexual partners of truckers varied widely and went far beyond *khalasis*. For both drivers and helpers, *hijras* emerged as the most frequently mentioned same sex partners followed by *laundas* or young boys, feminized men and a unique category of partners referred to as *bavasir* (men who complain of anal/rectal discomfort and get relief from being penetrated in anal intercourse). Anal penetration was the predominant sexual act. A number of truckers sought extensive non-penetrative sexual acts leading to anal penetration.

The truckers did not clearly see a connection between STIs and HIV and did not ever mention the need to recognize and/or prevent STIs. On the contrary, they delayed seeking treatment for STI symptoms or sought inappropriate treatment. They were aware of HIV, the various modes of its transmission and prevention strategies. However, what is of programmatic significance is that condoms were used very infrequently in MSM sexual encounters even though most of the truckers were aware of the importance of condoms for protection during vaginal sex with female sex workers.

Implications

Our study suggests that the sexual behaviors of truckers have changed considerably in recent years. Truckers have fewer contacts with female sex workers. Their involvement in MSM activities has increased. These changes appear to be a result of interventions which have placed a heavy emphasis on female sex workers as the primary sources for the spread of HIV infection. Furthermore, there has been an increase in condom use among female sex workers and a perceived reduction in pleasure through heterosexual contact when condoms are used. There is clearly an urgent need to correct this perception. Truckers also believe that anal sex is 'safe sex'. These misconceptions, a reflection of the problematic ways in which information about safe sexual practices is conveyed through AIDS awareness and outreach campaigns, must be corrected to prevent the transmission of HIV infection.

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