

Using Sex Workers as Researchers to Assess Condom Use Rates in Brothels in Nigeria

J. Anyanti, A. Ankomah, F. Mamman-Daura and G. Omoregie

Society for Family Health, Abuja, Nigeria

Summary

Most conventional research efforts at investigating consistent condom use among sex-workers have been ineffective as sex workers have good reasons to mistrust and resist researchers, and social desirability often leads to reported higher-than-actual levels of condom use. Twenty five brothels were selected in five states, and for each brothel, a trusted sex worker was recruited and used as a collaborative partner to obtain information on the level of condom use in the brothel. The discreet process ensured that no suspicion was raised among other resident sex workers. A total number of 383 sex workers were interviewed. Seventy percent reported using condoms in their last sex act with a client. Fifty-seven percent reported consistent use with all clients. Only 27% consistently used condoms with their boyfriends and husbands. These figures are between 20% and 50% lower than collected by conventional research methods. It can be concluded that fewer sex workers used condoms consistently with the various partner types than they reported in other studies carried out in Nigeria among sex workers.

Introduction

Given its illegal and stigmatised status, researching sex work is often difficult. Consequently sex workers in most cases distrust researchers and resist research, who they often misunderstand. Yet, very few programmes with sex workers include the sex workers themselves as partners in the research process. The very few that do so report of its usefulness and accuracy of findings (Pyett, 1998). One key area where

information from conventional surveys among sex workers have proved problematic is condom use with paying and non-paying clients.

Consistent condom use among sex workers is one of the most effective means of preventing the spread of HIV especially in communities where the epidemic is not well pronounced among the general population. Moreover, clients of sex workers are said to constitute the bridge between the sex workers and their other sex partners for the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Consistent condom use in commercial sex was reported to be the most effective and efficient way of slowing down the spread of HIV in any given community (World Bank, 1997). However, most conventional research efforts at finding out consistent condom use among sex-workers have been very evasive in most intervention programmes; not only in Nigeria but all over the world. Studies have shown that sex workers have good reasons to mistrust and resist researchers. Attempting to overcome this obstacle gave rise to the approach of engaging the sex workers as key informants and collaborative partners in the research process.

Commercial sex is commonplace in Nigeria, occurring in both residential brothels and more informally in street surroundings and is a pervasive feature of nearly all cities and many 'junction' towns where long distance truck drivers stop over for the night. In Lagos, as in other cities, the existence of brothels cuts across a variety of socio-economic and geographical locations: from the slums of Ajegunle, where there are over 30 hotels with resident sex workers, to affluent surroundings of Lekki Peninsula. It has been suggested that commercial sex work is on the increase probably because of the difficulties in finding alternative means of livelihood (Ilesanmi and Lewis, 1997).

Condom use among sex workers is often enmeshed in skewed gendered relations. From focus group findings, some sex workers often complain that some of their clients are unwilling to use condoms, and that some do offer to pay higher fees for non-condom use. Using conventional national surveys, 77% of sex workers in 2001 (Ladipo, Akinyemi, Andi-Emmanuel et al 2001) and 55% in 1998 (Ankomah, Anyanti, Omoregie et al) reported using condoms consistently with fee-paying clients. In another survey in brothels sited in 'hot spots', reported condom use was even higher – about 83%). Are these high figures on condom use real? Or are they the result of social desirability bias and/or mistrust of researchers by sex workers? Given the consistency of the findings it is important that this issue is examined in detail. This study aims therefore to sought answers to the research questions listed above to assist programmers in Nigeria in developing effective behavior change interventions among the sex workers in Nigeria

Methods and Materials

For each city, six brothels were selected. Out of the six, one was from a junction town, one from the intervention community. The se-

lected brothels were geographically distant from one another. For each selected brothel, a trusted informant was recruited who was used as a collaborative partner to obtain information on the level of condom use in the brothel. The entire process was done so discreetly in a manner that did not raise suspicion among the other resident sex workers. We insisted on some basic qualifications. An informant must be intelligent enough to be able to conceal study from other sex workers with ability to take mental notes of discussions and accurately record immediately after. If illiterate, an approach on how records will be kept was mutually designed. The person was approachable, likeable and accessible to almost all sex workers in the brothel. No chair lady was included as an informant as she was hierarchically higher than the sex workers and may not be in position to maintain their trust.

The informant was told to obtain information from all women in the brothel during the study period which lasted two weeks in September 2003. The informant herself recorded information on her own condom use behavior. All possible efforts were made to reduce threats to data validity. To ensure that the identities of informants were concealed, even to other informants from other brothels, training for the informants was done on a one-to-one basis. Each informant was individually trained in observation and recording techniques, and how to unobtrusively observe goings-on in the brothel and ask questions about condom use from other sex workers. Each informant was encouraged to suggest ways and means of asking for information and recording them without raising any suspicions. They were also trained on how to complete tally sheets to record all observations and responses to questions. The information required was reduced to the barest minimum. The key questions were: Was condom used during last night? Did they use with all clients? Did they use with all boyfriends (or non-commercial partners)? Do they use consistently with all clients? The informant was visited by a member of the research team twice every week (four visits altogether per brothel) and completed tally sheets as well as debrief on any useful information. Informants were asked how they collected the information and how they responded to probing questions from fellow sex workers. Meetings between the research team and the informants were genuinely friendly and un-intimidating and were held outside of the community. It was ensured that informants from the different brothels were not brought together as this may undermine the covert nature of the study. The informants easily volunteered to be involved, in a business where voluntarism and altruism are difficult to come.

Results

We compared the results obtained from our study with existing national and community-specific surveys in Nigeria from 1998 to date.

Table 1. Sex Workers' Condom Use from Various Studies

Condom use	Ladipo et al, 2001	Ankomah et al, 2004	Ankomah et al, 2003	FHI Study (Lagos) 2000	FHI Study (Abia) 2000	Present Study 2003
	%	%		%	%	%
Consistent use with all customers all the time	55	77	82	89	76	57
Condom use during last sex with paying partner	85	93	86	94	89	70
Consistent condom use with non-paying partner	NA	47	NA	NA	NA	27
Condom use at last sex with non-paying partner	NA	NA	31	34	48	37

Three key indicators were used: Consistent condom use with all customers (i.e. fee-paying clients); condom use during last sex with fee-paying client; and consistent condom use with boyfriend(s) or non-commercial partners.

As shown in Table 1, for all the indicators, the figures we obtained from our survey using sex workers as researchers were substantially lower than all other surveys. For example while 77% reported using condoms consistently (Ankomah et al, 2004) and 86% in Ankomah et al (2003), our study recorded only 57% doing so. This figure is between 25% and 50% lower than figures from existing studies. Another useful indicator is the use of condoms with boyfriends and other non-commercial partners. It is well known that partner type determined whether the sex workers would initiate condom negotiation. Condoms may be suggested mainly for fee-paying clients. With non-paying partners, there is some reported degree of trust and intimacy that did not exist with a casual customer and many felt that sex was based on love. To some of the women, the idea of using condoms with a boy friend was unthinkable, even though such relationships may be equally risky. Not only could they not suggest it, they believed it robbed the relationship of intimacy. Again Table 1 shows that reported condom use with boyfriends was about 75% lower than of conventional surveys (27% vs. 47%).

Conclusions

Self-report of condom use obtained through conventional surveys may be an underestimation. The proportion of sex workers who reported consistent condom use with the various partner types were a lot less than they admitted in conventional studies. The figures observed in our survey are more likely to be the real representation of actual condom use among sex workers. In terms of methodology, the approach teaches us that in researching a sensitive and illegal area such as such work, involving sex workers themselves is perhaps the most useful and accurate way of obtaining information. It is important to emphasize that condom use with non-commercial partners is particularly low. Sex workers are at potentially greater risk of contracting HIV from personal sexual relationships than from professional sexual contacts. Future interventions among sex workers, therefore, need to include strategies that focus on condom use with non-commercial sexual partners.

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