Physical and sexual violence among female sex workers in Cameroon: correlates with HIV risk, and access to health services and justice

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FSWs: High risk & Underserved

- Women who trade sex for drugs, money, resources, safety are at high risk for physical and sexual violence
  - range of perpetrators (clients, pimps, partners, police)
  - entry as minors is common; self-reported force, fraud or coercion less so but the needs are great
- GBV linked with STI/HIV risk and infection, much like patterns in the general population
- Systems failure
  - slip through the cracks of violence prevention/support infrastructure
  - criminal justice fails to protect and in some cases perpetrates harm
  - social stigma, added layers of self blame, isolation and criminalization → impunity

Deering et al., 2014 review
Decker et al., 2009; Thailand
Decker et al., 2012; Moscow
Decker et al., 2013; Baltimore MD
Decker et al., 2014; Russia Federation
Decker et al., 2015 Lancet Review
Stigma, marginalization & criminalization

• Perpetuates HIV risk
  – The police abuse us because it’s said that we are not even people or that we are animals! … The police brutalize us out there. They can come and confiscate everything saying that you’re a prostitute. They will also come back for you to bang you without a condom!

• Undermines accountability for GBV
  – If a man rapes you, ultimately we are prostitutes… we are a world apart! Why? Because when you go to the police, you will not be right! … So we don’t have the support! … they say we are not people.
Where studied, violence against female sex workers is prevalent and associated with HIV risk behavior and infection

- Less known about how it influences access to health and justice

Sex work is criminalized in Cameroon; qualitative reports suggest significant violence

Goals: understand prevalence of violence against FSWs and links with access to care, justice and HIV risk behavior
Methods

Cross-sectional survey data collection
• FSWs ages 18 and over, who sold sex in the past 12m for more than half of their income (n=1817)
• Participants were recruited through snowball sampling
  • initiated though venues in seven cities (Bamenda, Bafoussam, Bertoua, Douala, Kribi, Ngaoundéré, and Yaoundé)

Measures
• Sexual violence: ever forced to have sex when did not want to
• Physical violence: ever been beaten up or physically hurt by someone because of FSW status
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never physical or sexual GBV</th>
<th>Ever physical or sexual GBV</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>100.0 %</td>
<td>60.4 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-23</td>
<td>26.0 %</td>
<td>64.5 %</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-30</td>
<td>39.6 %</td>
<td>62.2 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31+</td>
<td>34.4 %</td>
<td>55.4 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>94.9 %</td>
<td>61.4 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5.1 %</td>
<td>37.1 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence on sex work for income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No income other than sex work</td>
<td>63.7 %</td>
<td>63.8 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has additional sources of income</td>
<td>36.3 %</td>
<td>54.7 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inconsistent condom use clients past month:
- GBV no: 50%
- GBV yes: 60%

Offered more money for unprotected sex:
- GBV no: 70%
- GBV yes: 80%

Inconsistent condom use with non-paying partner:
- GBV no: 90%
- GBV yes: 100%

Difficulty suggesting condom with non-paying partner:
- GBV no: 40%
- GBV yes: 50%

Condom failure past year:
- GBV no: 30%
- GBV yes: 40%

*adjusted for age, marital status, education, city, income other than sex work, and number of clients past month
Access to Health Services

- **Fear of health services**: AOR 2.25 (1.61, 3.16)
- **Denied health services**: AOR 1.57 (0.85, 2.93)
- **Mistreated in health center**: AOR 1.66 (1.01, 2.73)

*adjusted for age, marital status, education, city, income other than sex work, and number of clients past month*
Access to Justice

- Felt that police did not protect
  - GBV no: 30%
  - GBV yes: 40%
  - Adjusted OR: 1.41 (1.12, 1.78)

- Arrested
  - GBV no: 20%
  - GBV yes: 40%
  - Adjusted OR: 2.02 (1.64, 2.49)

- Jailed or imprisoned
  - GBV no: 20%
  - GBV yes: 40%
  - Adjusted OR: 1.87 (1.11, 3.15)

*adjusted for age, marital status, education, city, income other than sex work, and number of clients past month
Discussion

• Lifetime prevalence of FSWs is high in this context
  – Perpetrators and relative timing of abuse unclear
  – Measures limited to forced sex
  – Qualitative and anecdotal data suggest perpetrators include partners, clients, police and potentially “boys”

• Adds to evidence linking abuse with sexual risk behavior

• Those affected by GBV suffer significant barriers to accessing health and justice
  – Greater fear of health services
  – Greater feeling that police do not protect
Informing practice & policy

• Preliminary results reviewed in a forum with community-based organizations (CBOs; 2014)

• Situation analysis with CBOs demonstrated capacity for responding to violence and prioritized gaps
  – E.g., shift from referral for health care to considering peer advocacy

• GBV action plan developed in the context of HIV care and treatment initiative
Evidence & Guidelines on GBV for general populations

Evidence & Guidelines for FSWs
Conclusion

- Findings provide direction for addressing GBV as part of a comprehensive HIV strategy for FSW in this context.

- GBV policy and practice should be expanded to include the needs of FSWs.

- A policy response can and must ensure advocacy and support in accessing health services and justice, even where sex work is criminalized.