What is Samvedana Plus? An intervention and evaluation study, Samvedana Plus aims to understand and address violence and HIV risk in the intimate partnerships of female sex workers.

Partner violence causes suffering, disempowers women, promotes male dominance and breaks national laws. In addition, partner violence is associated with increased HIV risk.

Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT) is implementing Samvedana Plus, with 800 female sex workers and their intimate partners, in partnership with Chaitanya AIDSDeegumake Mahila Sangha, a community-based organisation (CBO) of sex workers in northern Karnataka, India. This programme runs from 2015 to 2017 with support from the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UNTF), WhatWorks to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls consortium and the University of Manitoba, Canada. Samvedana Plus is informed by successful strategies piloted with the support of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and UNFPA from 2013 to 2014. Within the DFID-funded STRIVE consortium, KHPT and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) are evaluating the impact of Samvedana Plus on violence and condom use in sex-workers’ intimate relationships.

Context

KHPT programmes have successfully reduced violence by clients, police and gangs against female sex workers, large scale advocacy through community and coalition mobilisation,5,15 however, violence persists in sex workers’ relationships with their intimate partners.4,15

Inconsistent condom use within intimate relationships results from a combination of sex workers’ intimate partnerships and how they modify these norms.

Effective interventions to address partner violence use overlapping strategies:5

■ shift norms about the acceptability of beating as a form of discipline
■ challenge gender roles that give men authority over women
■ work with men and women to encourage new relationship models and flexible gender roles

To decrease violence, structural interventions need to work with men to redefine masculinities in ways that are less toxic and dominant and control.19,20,21 Programs promoting equitable gender norms lessen male violence.35 Some argue that it is important to engage directly with perpetrators of violence.1,3,35

Evaluation

Learning from Samvedana Plus will sharpen understanding of the structural drivers of HIV transmission in general, and specifically, of effective ways to reduce violence within sex workers’ intimate relationships and increase condom use. The study will investigate the relationship between social norms and HIV in the context of sex workers’ intimate partnerships and assess the efficacy of the intervention in modifying these norms.
Women recognise violence as unacceptable and resist it. Sex workers are aware of their rights, avoid risks, respond to violence against others and access care and support.

Men use less violence against their sex worker partners. Intimate partners separate the idea of masculinity from violence and control. They come to value greater equality in their relationships and play a more supportive role.

Condom use increases between sex workers and their intimate partners. Women understand the HIV risks use in intimate relationships and gain skills to negotiate condom. Men develop a sense of responsibility about using condoms (male or female) in intimate relationships with sex workers.

Violence against women is sanctioned by common, negative gender norms. Inequitable and harmful gender norms keep women dependent on men, and equate dominance and aggression with masculinity. A male partner may become violent if the sex worker disobeys him, continues to see clients or suggests condom use, marriage or taking responsibility for her children. She tends to tolerate violence, as she fears an end to the relationship or more violence if she resists.

Strengthened networks of CBOs monitor and act against violence against sex workers in intimate relationships. Sex workers collectively acknowledge the need to address partner violence. They build solidarity with the wider women’s movement.

Community members see partner violence as “a domestic concern.” Many feel that sex workers “deserve” violence because they are considered immoral. Sex workers accept traditional gender norms and tolerate violence, as they see no recourse. Programmes to prevent violence against women ignore sex workers, thus further marginalising them.

CBOs do not feel equipped to address intimate partner violence. Sex-worker CBOs address HIV prevention and police and client violence but not partner violence, which they see as too complicated to tackle. Yet, most CBO members are likely to face violence from their partners.