

Masculinities, gender norms and intimate partner violence affecting female sex workers

A qualitative inquiry with intimate partners in northern Karnataka

RESEARCH
UPDATE

What is driving the spread of India's HIV epidemic into rural areas and low-prevalence states? There is a growing recognition that social and structural factors increase HIV risk for vulnerable groups including women. Does gender inequality increase HIV vulnerability of female sex workers (FSWs)? What harmful gender norms sanction violence against these women? How does intimate partner violence (IPV) increase the risk of HIV for FSWs? To find the answers, Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT) spoke to 17 FSWs and 34 intimate partners (IPs) in Bagalkot District, northern Karnataka. This update gives a summary of what the study found out and why this information is important.

Why do this survey?

The findings from this survey are important for Samvedana Plus, a programme 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. Sex workers who experience less violence use condoms more frequently than those who experience more violence. Violence can cause condom breakage and physical injuries, and prevents women from negotiating condom use. As most partners of sex workers have multiple, concurrent sexual partners, inconsistent condom use puts all at increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

To reduce risk of HIV and STIs, programmes should promote equitable gender norms. This means working with men to redefine masculinity in other ways, not as dominance and control. To do this, it is important to collect evidence of gender norms and IPV as possible drivers of HIV transmission, and to share new understanding with government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), funders and communities.

Samvedana Plus: Reducing violence and increasing condom use in the intimate partnerships of female sex workers

This programme aims to understand and address violence and HIV risk in the intimate partnerships of female sex workers. It intervenes with men who are violent, women who face abuse, and the wider society in order to change disempowering gender norms, reduce violence and increase condom use among sex workers in their intimate partnerships.

KHPT is implementing Samvedana Plus with 800 female sex workers and their intimate partners, in partnership with Chaitanya AIDS Tadegattuwa Mahila Sangha, a CBO of FSWs in northern Karnataka, India. The programme runs from 2015 to 2017 with support from the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UNTF), What Works 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 UNTF 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.





What did the study investigate?

The study explored the impact of norms around masculinity, gender and violence on the dynamics of IPV among FSWs. In addition, the study investigated:

- How intimate partners used their support to FSWs to justify their acts of violence
- The intimate partners' perceptions of the causes and effects of violence

What did the survey discover?

The study found that existing norms – male dominance, infidelity, violence as a legitimate form of discipline – increase sex workers' risk of contracting HIV while in intimate relationships.

"If we don't beat them, the mistakes done by women will become visible, and then the public will talk about me and question my manhood."

Kiranmay, 24, daily wage labourer/farmer



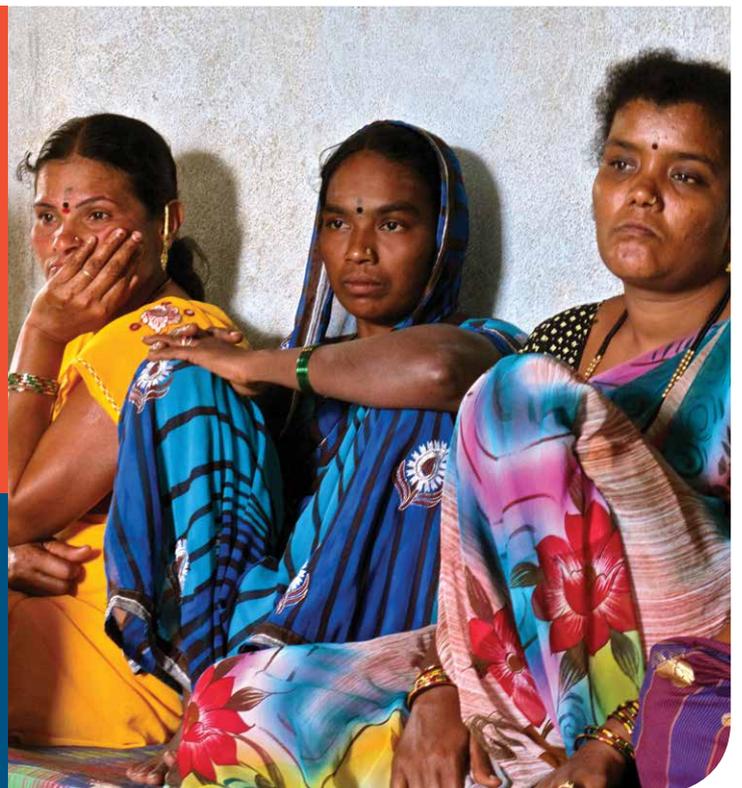
For intimate partners, the construct of the ideal woman did not differ substantially between their lovers and wives.

Intimate partners believed that:

- Women are inanimate 'materials' who deserved violence and lacked intelligence
- Women should be fearful of, listen to and respect men
- Their relationship with FSW lovers is expendable
- A man's honour is conditional upon the woman's subservience and on her staying within the house
- Women's labour is less physical and productive, and consequently less valuable

"There are some rules our ancestors used to declare: 'A wife must be scolded and an ox must be hit at every corner of the field it goes.' When we beat an ox, it will go in the right line. The same goes for a wife. She must be scolded and beaten sometimes; then she will be in our control and listen to us. Otherwise, she will do whatever comes to her mind. She will go in the wrong way.

Neeraj, 45, farmer





Patriarchal gender norms about women's subservience and roles influenced violence against women

Intimate partners use violence against their FSW lovers:

- to assert control over women and to correct their transgressions and lack of obedience
- to manipulate relationships between their lovers and wives and to maintain dominance over them
- to maintain their public image as being in control of the household and family

They consider that:

- violence to be appropriate and necessary for communicating with women
- the burden of caring for lover and wife, together with work pressure, puts stress on their relationships
- providing material support entitles them to control their FSW lovers



"If she doesn't take care of the children, keep the house clean, co-operate with me in sex or take care of my parent, then I have a reason to beat her."

Banu, 31, electrician



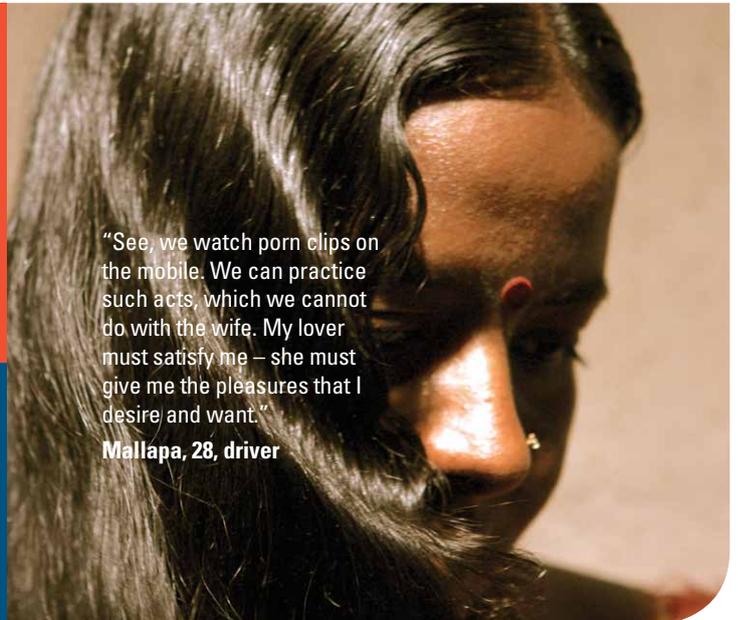
Men believed that women are to be blamed for STIs and HIV and is therefore fitting that they suffer.

Intimate partners:

- feel entitled to unprotected sex with their FSW lovers
- expect FSWs to perform and permit sexual acts that wives do not tolerate
- believe that demanding sexual fidelity from their FSW lovers will protect them from HIV

"If I don't hit her, she will continue with prostitution. She will have sex with other men, and also with me whenever I go, because of which she might get infected with some bad disease and I will get infected by her and I may lose my life. So I have to hit her."

Fareed, 32, coolie



"See, we watch porn clips on the mobile. We can practice such acts, which we cannot do with the wife. My lover must satisfy me – she must give me the pleasures that I desire and want."

Mallapa, 28, driver

What is the relevance of the findings for HIV programmes?

Many HIV-prevention programmes have targeted FSWs, with the expectation that they will persuade their sexual partners to use condoms. This approach has been fairly effective with the paying clients of FSWs. However, the FSWs' non-paying intimate partners have low regard for women, underestimate their HIV risk, feel entitled to unprotected sex, and expect porn-inspired sexual activities. So, it is unlikely that these intimate partners will listen to, learn from or comply with FSWs who attempt to negotiate condom use. For all these reasons, it is important that programmes work with intimate partners of female sex workers to reduce the HIV vulnerability of the women and their partners.





Call for action

- ✓ Increase outreach to the intimate partners of female sex workers, educate them about HIV prevention and promote a resilient concept of masculinity that supports women's liberty and equality
- ✓ Create collectives/forums to discuss relationship challenges and form positive norms based on love, respect, and equality
- ✓ Promote awareness of why and how violence against women should be eliminated
- ✓ Promote understanding and stricter enforcement of laws that protect women
- ✓ Engage leaders and role models among the intimate partners to speak against IPV and male supremacy



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