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

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.⁴¹

Samvedana Plus intervenes with men who are violent, women who face abuse and the wider society to:

- change disempowering gender norms
- reduce violence
- increase condom use among sex workers in their intimate partnerships

losing their partner and an inaccurate understanding of HIV risks.^{6, 17, 40}

Sex workers who experience less violence use condoms more frequently than those who experience more violence.^{6, 7, 10} Violence can cause condom breakage¹³ and physical injuries¹⁴, and prevents women from negotiating condom use¹⁵⁻¹⁷. As most partners of sex workers have multiple, concurrent sexual partners¹⁸, inconsistent condom use puts all at increased risk of STI and HIV^{19, 20}.

Design

Mobilised sex workers with collective agency face reduced violence and coercion and consistently use condoms with their regular partners. Empowering sex workers to handle crises protects them against the risk of violence and HIV.^{29, 30}

Effective interventions to address partner violence use overlapping strategies⁹ to:

- 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 masculinity in ways other than dominance and control.^{27, 28, 32} Programmes promoting equitable gender norms lessen male violence.^{27, 28} Some argue that it is important to engage directly with perpetrators of violence.^{1, 3, 31}

Evaluation

Learning from Samvedana Plus will sharpen understanding of the structural drivers of HIV transmission in general and, more 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 risk in the context of sex workers' intimate partnerships and assess the efficacy of the intervention in modifying these norms.



Context

KHPT programmes have successfully reduced violence by clients, police and gangs against female sex workers, largely through advocacy and community mobilisation.¹⁻⁵ However, violence persists in sex workers' relationships with their intimate partners.^{6, 7}

Inconsistent condom use within intimate relationships results from a combination of factors including: partner violence, alcohol, gender norms, notions of intimacy, trust and romance, sex workers' intention to have children and fear of



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PROBLEM

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.^{6, 8, 9} 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.^{6, 11} She tends to tolerate violence, as she fears an end to the relationship or more violence if she resists.^{6, 12}



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.



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.^{34, 35} Programmes to prevent violence against women ignore sex workers, thus further marginalising them.



ACTION

WITH PARTNERS

Samvedana Plus holds workshops and provides individual and couple counselling for sex workers and their partners, to:

- build their skills to change norms and improve communication in relationships
- inform them about protective laws
- empower sex workers to identify solutions and support mechanisms and to take action against violent and risky relationships

The workshops attempt to make the men more sensitive and responsible in their relationships and treat the sex workers with respect as equals. Continuous outreach includes special events for sex workers and their partners. The programme provides access to sexually transmitted infections and HIV services and distributes male and female condoms.

WITH COLLECTIVES

In the past, organising sex workers in collectives has improved their confidence to handle crises, negotiate condom use and reduce violence and coercion.^{29, 30, 31, 33} Samvedana Plus further develops the capacities of sex worker CBOs to:

- prioritise and address intimate partner violence
- encourage members' critical thinking on partner violence
- strengthen their crisis management systems to support sex workers experiencing partner violence

Making links with other women's organisations serves to integrate partner violence against sex workers within the wider movement against violence against women. It encourages solidarity between sex workers and other women.

WITH THE COMMUNITY

Samvedana Plus engages with local community leaders, residents, family members and self-help groups to:

- design sustainable ways to prevent violence^{36, 37}
- raise awareness about domestic violence
- create networks of support and action within the community³⁸
- advocate for women's rights

Community dialogue, street plays, folk shows and stakeholder meetings increase awareness of relevant rights and laws. Prominent men from the community, identified as male champions, speak against intimate partner violence at these events.

SUCCESS

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.

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.

Coordinated community response shifts social norms and checks violence against women

Sensitised communities successfully reduce violence against women including sex workers.

