

RISK AND HEALTH-SEEKING BEHAVIORS AND STD'S AMONG FEMALE SEX WORKERS IN ILOILO CITY*

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Abstract: *Personal interviews with female commercial sex workers in Iloilo City showed low condom use among the sex partners of the women. Chlamydia (pain or burning sensation during urination) was the most common STD symptom the commercial sex workers experienced. Most of them sought health care from government-run clinics/hospitals. Number of sex partners and use of condom were significantly associated with their experience with signs and symptoms of STD.*

INTRODUCTION

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) is a serious health problem in both developed and under-developed countries. Research evidences show that common STDs contribute to the spread of AIDS (WHO, 1997). The association between common STDs and AIDS makes STD prevention and control an important objective of the health program of the country.

Serological reports show an increasing trend of STD cases in Iloilo City. In 1993, out of 15,486 persons examined at the Iloilo Social Hygiene Clinic, 96 were found to be gonorrhea-positive. In 1995, the number increased to 180 out of 13,549 persons examined (Iloilo Social Hygiene Clinic, Serological Report, 1996).

Most STD studies in the Philippines and abroad center on epidemiologic investigation of STDs

and the description of the risk and health-seeking behaviors of high risk groups. Attempts to examine the relationship between risk and health seeking behavior and the occurrence of the signs and symptoms of STDs are few. This research gap explains the researcher's interest in conducting this study. Data generated from this study can help design intervention programs, which can help modify and correct the risk behaviors of female registered sex workers.

THE STUDY OBJECTIVES

This investigation primarily aimed to determine risk and health-seeking behaviors and the occurrence of the signs and symptoms of STD's among the registered female sex workers in Iloilo City. It also aimed to determine if there is a relationship between the respondents' risk and health-seeking behaviors and the occurrence of the signs and symptoms of STDs.

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METHODOLOGY

A random sample of 146 registered female sex workers who were regular clients of Iloilo Social Hygiene Clinic constitutes the respondents of this study. They were interviewed in bars, disco houses or in the clinic during their periodic check-up by nurses trained to interview. A standardized interview guide adopted from DOH and the UCLA Behavioral Research Guide was the main survey instrument used. The respondents' consent was sought before any interview was conducted. Data were processed and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows Version 6.0.

FINDINGS**Characteristics of the Sex Workers**

On the average, the registered female sex workers were 24.4 years old. Most of them were in their twenties (54.8 %), but one in five were in their 30's. Most of the women were single (82.2%). Most of them were educated slightly more than half (53.4%) had high school education, while nearly a quarter (23.3%) were college-educated. They were working in various places, but mostly in a bar/club gardens (54.10%).

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents According to Sex, Civil Status and Educational Attainment

Characteristics	No.	Percent
<u>Age (in years)</u>		
15-19	38	26.33
20-29	80	54.80
30 and above	28	20.97
Mean Age = 24.40		
<u>Civil Status</u>		
Single	120	82.20
Married	11	7.50
Separated/Widowed	15	10.30
<u>Educ. Attainment</u>		
Elementary or less	34	23.30
High-School	78	53.40
College	11	23.30
<u>Place of Work</u>		
Bar/club garden	79	54.10
Massage parlor	25	17.10
Karaoke/KTV/disco house	42	28.70

Risk Behaviors

Although slightly more than half (61.7%) of the commercial sex workers had only one to two sex partners during the week preceding the interview, one in four (24.7%) had five or more sex partners (Table 2). The rest had three or more partners. The data suggest that most of the commercial sex workers in Iloilo City were “monogamous.”

Condom use was unpopular among the partners of the sex workers. Nearly half of them claimed that their sex partners never used condom, while, slightly more than one-third (38.4%) admitted occasional use of condom. Only 13.7 % reported that they “always” used

of condom. Only a few (5%) were intravenous drug users.

Sex Behaviors

A high percentage of the sex workers were engaged in penetrative vaginal sex (83.6%) and fellatio (cunnilingus)-oral sex (82.2%). Table 3 shows that more than half admitted engaging in sodomy or anal sex (54.8%). The women claimed, that they always remind their partners to use condom during sex. This practice puts most (56.8%) of the sex workers under the category of having “probably safe” sex practices. Slightly more than a quarter (26.4%) were classified as having “unsafe” sexual practices because aside from

Table 2. Distribution of Commercial Sex Workers According to Number of Sex Partners for the Past Week, Condom Use and Use of Intravenous Drugs.

Indicator	Number	Percent
<u>Number of Sex Partners</u>	(n=146)	
1-2	90	61.7
3-4	20	13.7
5 or more	36	24.7
Ave. No. of sex partners =1.5		
<u>Condom Use By Sex partners</u>	(n=146)	
Always	24	16.4
Sometimes	56	38.4
Never	66	45.2
Women who Used Intravenous Drugs	8	5.50

Table 3. Distribution of Commercial Sex Workers According to Sexual Practices

Sexual Practices	Number	Percent
Safe Practices (Non-penetrative Sex)	24	16.4
Probably Safe (Penetrative sex with condom)	83	56.8
Unsafe (penetrative sex without condom)	39	26.4

engaging in penetrative sex, their partners were also not using condom.

Occurrence of Signs and Symptoms of STD

STD infection was not common among the sex workers. Less than one-half of the respondents had experienced signs and symptoms of STD. Among those who had been infected, the most common sign or symptom of STD reported was burning sensation during urination, a symptom of Chlamydia. Table 4 shows that Chlamydia was experienced by nearly a quarter of the women (23.3%). Yellow discharges, a symptom of gonorrhea, was experienced by 15.1% of the

women, while sore or ulcer in the vagina or syphilis was reported by 10%. Most of them did not have any sign or symptom of STD. The sex workers attributed the low incidence of STD infection among them to the fact that they regularly visit the Social Hygiene Clinic of Iloilo City for examination or check up.

Health Seeking Behavior

The Iloilo Social Hygiene Clinic remains to be the focal avenue for STD check-up and treatment among the female registered sex workers. Table 5 shows that slightly more than one-half of the women had visited the clinic the week before the survey (57.5%). Others had gone to government health clinics (11.0%) or to private clinics (14.4%). A

Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Women Who Experienced Signs and Symptoms of STD's (Multiple Response)

Signs and Symptoms of STD	Number (N=146)	Percent
Pain/Burning Sensation During Urination (Chlamydia)	34	23.3
Yellowish Discharge from Vagina (Gonorrhea)	22	15.1
Sore or Ulcer in Vagina (Syphilis)	10	6.9

Table 5. Distribution of Respondents According to Who/Where they Primarily Sought Help When They Have STD's (Multiple Response)

Person/Institution Consulted	Number (n=146)	%
Social Hygiene Clinic	84	57.5
Government Clinic/Hospital	16	11.0
Private Doctor/Clinic/Hospital	21	14.4
Friends/Relatives	1	0.7
Co-workers	24	16.4

substantial number (16.4%) of the women sought the help of their co-workers, who may have probably previous experience with STD.

Relational Analysis

A significant association was found between the sex workers' number of sex partners and their experience with each of the three signs and symptoms of STD (pain/burning sensation during urination, yellowish discharges from vagina and sore/ulcers in the vagina). All the Cramer's V results for the tests of association between variables were significant at 5% level (0.28, 0.35, 0.49, respectively). The data support the hypothesis that the more sexual partners a sex worker has, the more likely that she will get infected with STD. Contact with numerous partners exposes a woman to

infection because of the amount and the numerous sources of semen that goes to the body of a women.

Frequency of condom use was also found to be significantly linked with occurrence of STD, particularly chlamydia infection or pain/burning sensation during urination and sores/ulcer in the vagina (Cramer's V=0.26 and 0.58, respectively). Sex workers whose partners do not use condom were more likely to get infected with chlamydia and gonorrhea than those whose partners are not using condom. This confirms the protective function of condom. The use of intravenous drug was found to be associated with occurrence of yellowish discharges from the vagina only (Cramer's V=0.28). Contrary to expectations, the occurrence of the signs and symptoms of STDs was not

Table 6. Cramer's V Results for Tests of Association Between Risk Health-Seeking Behaviors and Incidence of Signs and Symptoms of STD's.

Signs and Symptoms of STD's	Rish /Health-Seeking Behavior				
	No. of Sex Partners	Condom Use	Use of Injectable Drugs	Sexual Practices	Health-seeking Behaviors
Pain/Burning Sensation (Chlamydia)	0.28*	0.26*	0.13	0.18	0.29*
Yellowish Discharge from Vagina (Gonorrhea)	0.35*	0.24	0.28*	0.20	0.44*
Sore/Ulcer in the vagina (Syphilis)	0.49*	0.58*	0.09	0.10	0.26*

* Significant at 5 percent level

related to the sex workers' sexual practices.

The significant association between health seeking behavior of the sex workers and the occurrence of signs and symptoms of STD supports the theory on health promotion. Since most of the sex workers were conscious of the health risks of their sexual activities, they tended to take precautionary measures by submitting to regular consultation and check up at the Social Hygiene Clinic. Their consistent health-seeking behavior clearly contributes to their health promotion and protection from STD.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The significant association between number of sex partners, condom use and incidence of STD among the sex workers confirms the dangers of unsafe sex. The more exposed a sex worker is to semen due to multiple partners, the more likely that she will get infected with STD. The avoidance of condom use puts a sex worker at greater risk of acquiring STD.

The findings suggest the need to intensify and strengthen STD prevention and control programs. There is a need for a more aggressive campaign against

prostitution and irresponsible sexual behaviors to protect women from health risks. Moreover, since prostitution cannot be easily eradicated, those who are in the “business” must at least be given protection through health education, counseling services and aggressive campaign for safe sex. It is also important that the Iloilo Social Hygiene Clinic and City Task Force on Prostitution strictly implement the regulatory measure of issuing pink cards to sex workers who are not sick of STD.

Future research should look more closely into psychological factors and relationship dynamics that affect risk behaviors and health seeking behaviors of the sex workers.

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