A Community-based Qualitative Study to Explore the Experience and Understandings of Intimate Partner Violence among Women in Sex Work and their Intimate Partners in north Karnataka, India

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Background

The high prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among women, and particularly those in sex work or female sex workers (FSWs), has been increasingly recognized. Studies involving female sex workers have focused on violence from clients, often quantitatively identifying risk factors. Few studies have examined IPV facing FSWs and none have included both male and female partners or taken a community-based research (CBR) approach. Qualitative community-based research is valuable for better understanding the mechanisms by which multi-levelled factors may be increasing vulnerability to IPV from the perspective of women in sex work and their male intimate partners.

Objective

To explore how women in sex work and male intimate partners (IPs) describe their experiences and understandings of intimate partner violence (IPV) in north Karnataka state, south India.

Methods

Participants were purposively selected to maximize variation among female sex workers and their intimate partners enrolled in the program from Bagalkot district. The research questions, interview tools, ethical protocols and data collection were undertaken with a Research Committee of selected representatives from CMS.

Data Collection

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by trained community research investigators (CRIIs) with 12 FSWs.
- A trained local male research investigator conducted interviews with 10 male intimate partners with consent from their female partners.
- Data collection was completed between July and November 2014.
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

Thematic Content Analysis

- Coding of di-identified interviews in NVivo 10.0 and organization into categories was undertaken with guidance from the semi-structured interview guide. Pseudonyms for interviewees are presented here.
- Discussions between the first and second author and CRIIs/RI were undertaken to contextualize and summarize key points across interviews.
- Collaborative analysis with the RC based on these main points was undertaken to determine themes on how violence is experienced and understood by the respondents.

Conclusions

- The results demonstrate that vulnerability to IPV was structural in nature, involving the interplay of issues on multiple levels, including gender role expectations and norms on violence.
- Our qualitative analysis allowed a deeper exploration of the myriad life and relationship issues that fed into the occurrence of violence, complementing past studies to linearly identify factors associated with IPV.
- Though violence was accepted by many respondents either based on normative or practical considerations, there were those who stated that violence is not correct in any circumstance, indicating the potential for change among couples and the wider community.
- The process involved a multi-directional transfer of skills and knowledge that can benefit studies to come. The trustworthiness of results was strengthened with direct input from the community representatives.

Implications

- Our findings suggest that programs must work not only at the individual and relationship levels to address triggers of IPV by changing behaviour, but also the community and societal levels to address the structural nature of IPV.
- Ongoing evaluation research should be undertaken to assess the effectiveness of structural programs for reducing IPV, particularly as the increasingly involving men and the wider communities.
- Future population-based research should be conducted to better understand the impact of norms and the generalizability of the relevant issues underlying IPV in this study among FSWs or among marital couples elsewhere. Qualitative studies adapting a similar community-based research approach would also be valuable to explore variation in how these issues may manifest in other contexts.

References