

Same Sex Practices Among Young Men in Rural India— Implications for Programs

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Conclusion

- While the study identified about one-tenth of young men who report both male-to-male and heterosexual activity, it is probable that there may be more young men who practiced male-to-male sex but hesitated to admit it. Survey researchers need to ensure time to establish rapport with young men prior to exploring sensitive and taboo issues about sexual behaviors.
- Study findings indicate that young men with same-sex behaviors had higher risk practices than young men with heterosexual behavior as they had more types of and numbers of partners (that included both male and female partners) and were less likely to use condoms with their partners.
- Also, young men with same-sex behaviors engaged in anal sex with female partners and rarely used condoms. Coupled with the fact that most of these young men did not use condoms with male partners as well, this practice has serious implications for HIV transmission to female partners.
- From a programmatic point of view, most of these young men are often not included in interventions that reach out to men who have sex with men (MSM) as they may or may not identify as being "homosexual" or "MSM," but their behaviors put them at increased risk for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Interventions need to promote safe sex, including safe anal sex with either male or female partners as part of ongoing messages on safe sexual practices with young men.

Background

- Most HIV prevention programs in India that work to reduce risk and vulnerabilities of MSM face a great challenge in reaching out to their key populations as there continues to be a high degree of stigma associated with homosexuality.
- Most MSM interventions work with the "visible" populations of feminized men or *kothis* and transgenders or *hijras* and not always with their clients or partners who see themselves as "straight" men and choose to stay "invisible".
- The challenge is to reach out to these sexual partners who do not consider themselves as a "key population" for HIV prevention. A previous community based study among rural Indian young men estimated that 9% of all young men had anal penetrative sex with a man in the last one year. At the same time, it is estimated that 42% of all MSM are married, contributing to increasing HIV infection rate among women of India.
- It is important to understand same-sex behaviors of young men in the general population to better inform and guide prevention programs working with men.

Methods

- Horizons/Population Council and MAMTA undertook a cross-sectional study with randomly selected 600 young men aged 15–29 years from 24 rural villages in north India to promote gender equity and reduce HIV risk behaviors.
- In this paper we present findings from a sub-sample of young men who reported they had engaged in same-sex behaviors to understand their profile and risk practices and compare them with young men who did not report same-sex behaviors (or reported heterosexual behaviors).

Results

- Of the total sample of young men (n = 600), 9% (n = 55) reported ever having sex with a male partner.
- Of the 300 sexually active young men, 18% (n = 55) reported they had had sex with a male partner.

Table 1 Profile of sexually active young men

| Background characteristics | Same sex behavior n = 55 | Heterosexual behavior n = 245 |
|--|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Age (%) | | |
| ≤ 19 years | 64 | 56 |
| ≥ 20 years | 36 | 44 |
| Median years of education (Years) | 9 | 9 |
| Marital status (%) | | |
| Single | 71 | 60 |
| Employment status (%) | | |
| Employed | 51 | 47 |

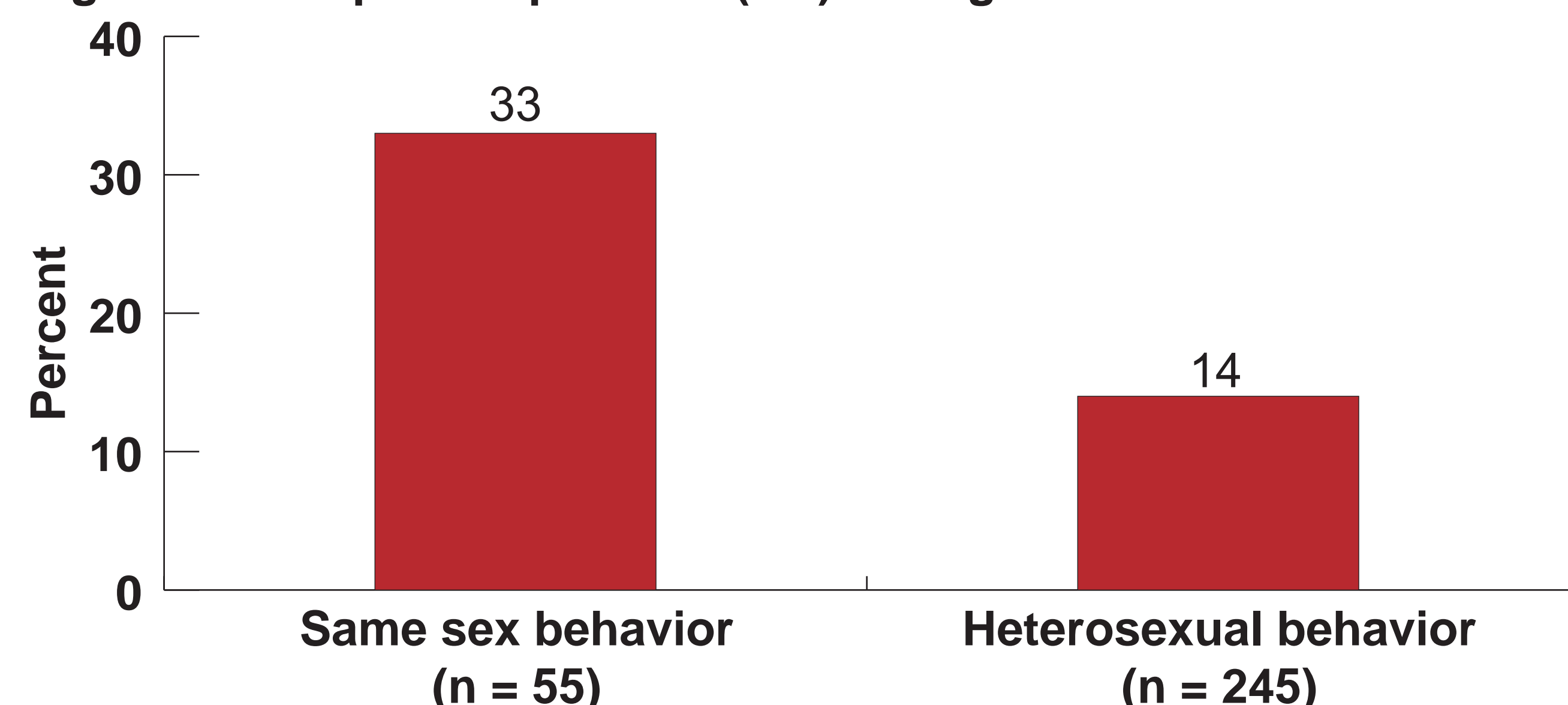
- Sexual debut of young men with same-sex behavior was at a younger age as compared to men with heterosexual behavior (12 years vs. 15 years respectively).
- Of the young men who reported same-sex behavior, the large majority said their first sexual partner was a female and only one-fourth said it was a male partner (see Table 2).
- Anal sex with female partners was reported by 13% of men with same-sex behaviors and 6% of men with heterosexual behavior.

Table 2 First sexual partner of respondents

| Sexual partner at first sex (%) | Same sex behavior n = 55 | Heterosexual behavior n = 245 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Girlfriend | 31 | 42 |
| Male partner | 24 | — |
| Wife | 2 | 18 |
| Female relative | 7 | 9 |
| Female sex worker | 4 | 1 |
| Female living in the neighborhood | 33 | 30 |

- Sexual activity in the last 3 months was reported by close to three-fourths of the young men (men with same sex behaviors n = 39/55; men with heterosexual behavior n = 176/245).

Figure 1 Multiple sex partners (> 2) during the last 3 months



- Of the young men who had sex in the last 3 months, young men with same-sex behavior were more likely to have had sex with more types of sexual partners as compared to young men who reported heterosexual behaviors (see Table 3 below).

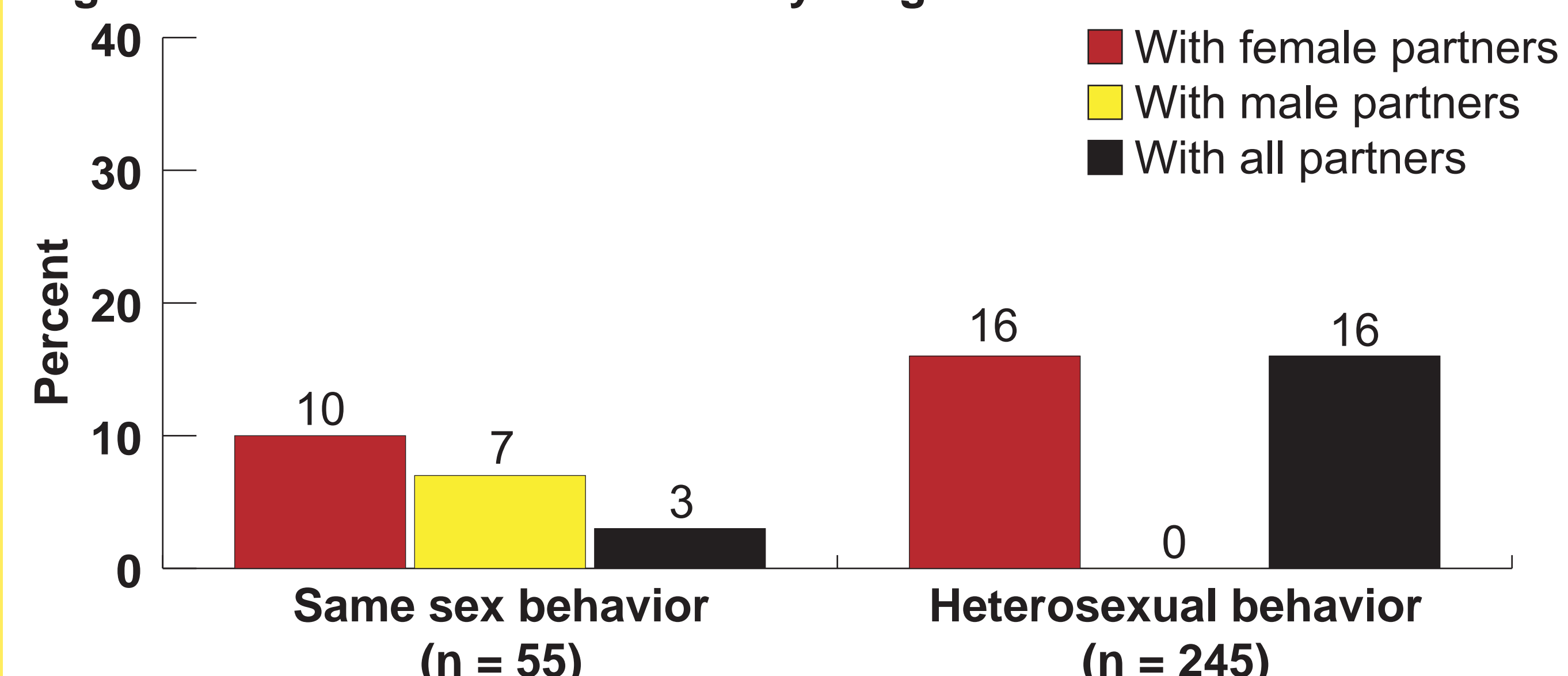
- Young men with same-sex behaviors had sex with more female sex partners (mean number of female sex partners between 2 and 3) as compared to men with heterosexual behavior (mean number of female sex partner = 1).
- Also, one-third of young men with same-sex behavior reported they had sex with more than two partners as compared to 14% of men with heterosexual behavior.

Table 3 Sexual partners of young men in last 3 months

| | Same sex behaviors n = 39 | | Heterosexual behaviors n = 39 | |
|--|------------------------------|----------|----------------------------------|----------|
| | Partners % | Mean no. | Partners % | Mean no. |
| Sex partners during last 3 months | | | | |
| Female casual partners | 39 | 2.5 | 29 | 1 |
| Female sex workers | 10 | 2.6 | 3 | 1 |
| Girlfriend | 51 | — | 41 | — |
| Male partner | 33 | 2.0 | — | — |
| Wife | 23 | — | 40 | — |

- Condom use with all partners for all sexual acts was reported by only 3% of men who had same-sex behaviors as compared to 16% of men who had heterosexual behaviors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Condom use behavior of young men



- More than four-fifths of the young men with same-sex behaviors reported at least one symptom of STI-like symptoms compared to three-fifths of young men with heterosexual behavior. Similarly, the proportion of young men reporting three or more STI symptoms was higher among young men with same-sex behaviors (44% vs. 19%).

- In both the categories of young men who reported at least one symptom of STI, only one-fourth of young men reported having gone for treatment.

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