

Perceived and experienced stigma among male sex workers who sell sex to men in Mombasa, Kenya

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1: Introduction

In many African settings the practice of men having sex with men is often dismissed as un-African, against local culture and generally viewed with hostility. Many African countries have laws criminalizing same sex relationships. In Mombasa, there is a greater acknowledgement of the existence of same sex between men, but little tolerance from the society. Male sex workers (MSW) who sell sex to men are despised, ridiculed and constantly harassed by clients, partners and the general community. Evidence shows that in both the developed and developing countries MSW are at heightened risk for HIV infection. Better understanding of MSW and its effect on their lives would allow us to have a clear picture of situations that place them at risk of HIV.

2: Methodology

In order to gain further insight into the perspectives of stigma and discrimination among MSW, the Population Council in collaboration with ICRH conducted a cross-sectional pre-intervention survey to examine the social characteristics and sexual risk behaviors among MSW in Mombasa. By contacting 511 MSWs we were able to perform 425 quantitative interviews, 10 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs). For the IDIs and FGDs, participants of aged 16 to 60, and of different sexual identities were selected purposively from among the quantitative survey participants. This poster presents the qualitative IDIs and FGD research findings captured from MSWs.

3: Key Findings

Almost all respondents indicated that stigma and discrimination was a major challenge in their everyday lives. They believe that the general society does not accept them, and that they must conceal their sexual identities.

Stigma and discrimination from family members include:

MSWs cited the following experiences of stigma and discrimination from family members.

- Abuse and ridicules pertaining to one's sexuality.
- Denial of basic family support
- Avoidance and isolation from family or social functions.
- Desertion from family.

"I have been discriminated against where people feel that I am a person of no value. My sisters feel I am useless. They ask why I behave and do things that a woman should do. I have been abused. They tell others look at that dume jike (man-woman) and mock me"

20 years old MSW

Stigma and discrimination experienced from health care workers

Respondents complained of difficulty in accessing health care due to perceived stigma and discrimination from health care workers.

MSWs cited the following examples of difficult scenarios with service providers:

- Difficulty in self identifying as a homosexual when seeking STI treatment.
- Inability to disclose anal STI symptoms and other confidential issues.
- Being subjected to provider ridicule.
- Provider reluctance with treatment of anal STI.

"You can find treatment yes, but most people are scared of visiting the health facilities, because the problem is that even telling the health care worker that you have an anal STI is not easy. But even if you tell them, they wont give you good medical care. They will ask you if you are MSM. This discourages MSMs to go to the health care facilities."

Often I self medicate, or what you do is go observe the health care workers and then find out if the person you have seen can treat you from home. As I told you earlier, I had been mistreated once so I don't think we can get any favorable treatment from these people. A nurse in one clinic had to wear two gloves on her hands; and at the same time she used a ruler to examine for anal STI; now this type of thing is really discriminating"

26 years old MSW

Stigma and discrimination experienced from law enforcement

MSWs reported various forms of stigma and discrimination from law enforcement agencies. Typical experiences include:

- Constant harassment
- Physical assault and Rape
- Arbitrary arrests, extortion and fines in the court of law.

"Police harass us a lot. They beat us and often times book us in jail. They came to our house the other day and arrested us. I was caught by police near a discotheque. Luckily I had money and I gave them. Otherwise I would have been raped or taken to cells"

22 years old MSW

Coping strategies of stigma and discrimination

When asked about how they cope with stigma and discrimination, MSWs cited the following:

- Vacating their residence after being identified as homosexual.
- Moving in with other MSW peers after being chased away from home.
- Self medication or false representation of anal STI.
- Avoidance of social gatherings.
- Resorting to full time sex trade due to lack employment.

4: Conclusion

This study highlights major problems of perceived and experienced stigma among men who sell sex to men. It also illustrates how stigma, discrimination and violence from family members, health workers and the law enforcement is likely to fuel the HIV epidemic rather than lead to positive behavior change among MSW. There is need for a holistic approach that engages the local community, law enforcers and policy makers to be responsive to MSW needs. Further research is needed to identify effective mechanisms for advocacy and stigma reduction among law enforcers, health workers and the community in order to promote HIV/STI prevention among male sex workers.

5: Acknowledgements

We wish to commend the commitment and effort of MSW study participants. In addition, we thank Dr A Kahindi, Provincial Medical Officer, Coast Province, and Dr Edward Sanders of KEMRI for their overwhelming support. We also acknowledge Agnes Rinyiru, Dancan Otieno and Daniel Lango of ICRH.