Sex Work and Stigmatization: A Place-Based Analysis of the Public Health Impact of Stigma on Sex Worker Populations in Cape Town, South Africa

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Project Background

- South Africa has a population of nearly 53 million people, more than half of which live in poverty. Certain “key populations” including sex workers are especially vulnerable to poverty, morbidity and mortality.
- Significant expansion of health services for sex workers has slowed rates of certain sexually transmitted infections within this population. However other occupational risks such as physical and sexual violence from clients, partners, and police and high levels of discrimination and stigma fail to be addressed. A majority of sex workers experience poor health outcomes.
- Though the sex work industry in Cape Town is thriving, the Sexual Offences Act of 1957, amended in 2007, fully criminalizes sex work in South Africa, leaving sex workers vulnerable to violence, extortion, disease and even death, as sex workers are made all but invisible. In recent years, support for the decriminalization of sex work has gained momentum. “Decrim” maintains that “sex work is work” and demands that sex workers and their families be granted the autonomy they need to improve their personal safety and financial security.
- One of the major human rights organizations in South Africa advocating for the decriminalization of sex work is the Sex Worker Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT). SWEAT and their partners provide basic healthcare, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and sex worker mobilization.

Objective

- To provide evidence-based recommendations to SWEAT for program development and improvement in the areas of client outreach, psycho-social support services, health access, and crisis mitigation

Methodology

- Conducted 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with sex workers, Helpline counselors, and paralegals
- Conducted 4 Key Informant interviews with SWEAT staff
- Conducted 30 In-depth Interviews with provincial site Helpline managers, clients of sex workers, and with sex workers regarding individual religiosity and experiences in accessing healthcare
- Evaluated SWEAT’s outreach services, creative workshops and support groups available for sex workers through systematic observation
- Piloted of a curriculum developed to meet the needs of sex workers in their role as mothers
- Conducted an evaluation of the piloted curriculum, including pre- and post-test surveys and 2 FGDs with program participants

Preliminary Findings

- Motivation for purchasing sex tended to focus on the issue of relative value between client and sex worker and the concept of “the hunt.” Information from client interviews will be used to inform the development of much-needed client outreach programming
- There is a clear need for further training and education for Helpline counselors, particularly in the areas of health literacy and trauma counseling, increased face-to-face interaction between counselors and service-users, additional resources for HIV positive people in crisis, and the development of region-specific Helpline interventions focused on mental health, legal and human rights
- There is a need for further development and continued implementation of both ARV and spiritual support groups. Service users expressed high interest and commitment to both
- Common experiences with stigma and discrimination in health facilities suggests strong need for further sensitization of health facility staff and increased partnerships with “sex worker-friendly” clinics
- The Mothers of the Future curriculum was well received by both SWEAT staff and participants. FGDs suggest high levels of participant acceptability, satisfaction, and perception of knowledge gain

Progress to Date

- Presented preliminary findings and recommendations to SWEAT and Women’s Legal Center staff
- Created a spiritual support group for women interested in exploring and deepening their Christian faith
- Created an ARV support group for HIV positive women
- Completed pilot and evaluation of Mothers of the Future curriculum through a 10-day workshop and identified recommendations for improvement
- Assisted Helpline team with the development of monitoring and tracking tools
- Created outreach materials targeted towards client population (pamphlets, recruitment protocol, online and newspaper advertisements)

Next Steps

- Provide completed interview transcripts to SWEAT
- Complete thematic analysis of qualitative data
- Complete quantitative analysis of pre- and post-test data
- Submit final evaluation reports, curriculum development, and recommendations regarding Helpline, Mothers of the Future, client outreach and existing outreach and psycho-social support programs to SWEAT to be implemented

Project Partners

- Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce
- Sisonke
- Women’s Legal Centre
- Emory Advisors: Roger Rochat, MD (Emory University)
- Funding Organizations: Emory Global Health Institute