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**HIV Risk Among Street and Nightclub-based
Sex Workers in Lusaka, Zambia:
Implications for HIV Prevention Interventions**

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Abstract

Objective: To conduct formative research among sex workers in Lusaka, Zambia, illustrating how the interaction between social context and personal identity affects sex workers' ability to engage in safe sex.

Methods: Analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 20 commercial sex workers in Lusaka, including both nightclub and street-based sex workers.

Results: The nightclub-based sex workers in our sample were less likely to practice preventive sexual behaviors than street-based sex workers. Street-based sex workers had a professional identity and were willing to be publicly acknowledged as sex workers, which appears to have made it easier to convince clients to use condoms. By contrast, nightclub-based sex workers did not want to be identified as sex workers. They were motivated by the desire to meet a man who would marry them and change their lives. As a consequence, nightclub-based sex workers could not publicly acknowledge their risk of STD/HIV infection. Hence, many nightclub-based sex workers went against their better judgement by not using condoms.

Conclusions: These findings illustrate how social context can interact with personal identity to strongly influence sex workers' ability to take precautions during high-risk sexual encounters. A thorough understanding of issues of personal identity and social context can help improve the design of HIV prevention interventions aimed at sex workers.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the recognition of the role of commercial sex work in the spread of HIV (Carswell, 1989; Plummer et al., 1991; Orubuloye et al., 1993), numerous studies have been conducted to understand patterns of risk behavior and condom use among sex workers (Wilson et al., 1989; Wilson et al., 1990; Pickering et al., 1993, World Bank, 1997; Ford, et al., 1998). Most of this research has focused on ways of preventing women who sell sex from infecting their clients. Relatively little attention has been paid to the social context of these women's lives and to factors that place them at risk of practising unsafe sex.

The lives of commercial sex workers remain poorly understood, especially in terms of the economic and social opportunities available to women and the health and psychological consequences of sex work. A better understanding of women's lives and their work as well as how their identity shapes their behavior, may facilitate the development of more effective policies and interventions to prevent HIV transmission (de Zaluondo et al., 1991; de Zaluondo and Bernard, 1995; Gatter, 1995; Campbell and Kelly, 1995; Wolffers et al., 1999).

This study examines how female sex workers in Lusaka describe their life-circumstances: how they began sex work, the conditions in which they work, and the steps they take to protect themselves against the sexual transmission of HIV. This study may be helpful to policy-makers involved in the development of appropriate AIDS prevention interventions and for legislators who want to initiate social policies supportive to women.

BACKGROUND

The social and economic opportunities that have been and are available to Zambian women influence their sexual and reproductive health outcomes (Hansen, 1984). In the first few decades of the 20th century (during the colonial period), farmers from Northern Rhodesia were coerced to take up wage employment away from their homes and women were relegated a purely domestic role. Due to constraints on employment, only men could reside in towns. Native authorities agreed with the colonial administrators that urban life was corrupting for women, and they could not be allowed to live in urban areas. During this time many husbands deserted their wives. Since single or divorced women were unable to find male partners in rural areas, women did settle illegally in urban areas. The few means of earning an income available to illegal women settlers were the sale of home-brewed beer and the sale of sex. By the 1950s, women did make inroads into market trading but, because of small profit margins and low capital accumulation, few were able to make enough profits to be able to operate businesses without male support.

During the colonial period, the primary function of African education was to produce semi-skilled male labor (Hansen, 1984). After independence, educational opportunities for women gradually increased. The boom in mining during the 1960s and the early 1970s helped finance education and reduced some of the gender-based educational inequalities of the colonial period. However, the collapse in world copper prices and the decline of the Zambian economy during the late 1970s and the 1980s, reversed many of these advances. Most important, employment opportunities for many low-income women did not change significantly after independence. Because of a surplus of unskilled and semi-skilled men and the existing gender division of labor, few women were able to get jobs that men were willing to do.

Limited employment opportunities continue to influence sexual outcomes for women in present day Zambia. Efforts to find and keep jobs may involve sexual favors (Hansen, 1984; Katongo, 1999; Katamba, 2000).

Many low-income women in Zambia engage in small scale trading (e.g. selling second-hand clothes) or produce home-brew. According to one study, only 15% of formal sector employees in Zambia are women (Campbell and Kelly, 1995). Marriage remains women's key to economic survival (Hansen, 1984; Hansen 1997). Women who are not married may form sexual/economic relationships to support themselves, and married women strive keep their marriages intact. Societal norms also contribute to women's psychological need to be married: negative attitudes persist toward women who are not in marital union and "independent women" are thought to be a threat to the moral fabric of society (Hansen, 1984).

The inability to form a permanent partnership may make a woman feel that she has been unable to meet social expectations, and may make her psychologically vulnerable by lowering her self-esteem. Because of their economic dependence on men, the termination of marriage may have disastrous financial consequences for women without other means of support and may push some women into sex work (Wilson et al., 1989).

Commercial sex work is illegal in Zambia and official policy towards sex workers is highly unsympathetic. Police raids against sex workers are commonplace (Hampande, 1999) and sex workers live in a constant fear of being arrested. The lack of legal protection for sex workers, the stigma associated with sex work, and mass-media reinforcement of negative images of sex workers contribute toward placing them at heightened risk of exposure to violence. Because the adoption of healthy behaviors is influenced by supportive social environments (Tawil et al., 1995) and perceived control over one's life (Bandura, 1986), the highly clandestine, physically dangerous and stigmatized nature of sex work may reduce sex workers' abilities to implement effective preventive behaviors.

DATA AND METHODS

This study is based on data from open-ended semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 sex workers in Lusaka. Each sex worker was interviewed once. Semi-structured interviews have been successfully used in studies of commercial sex workers in Southern Africa (e.g. Campbell, 2000) and are preferred over unstructured interviews when one interview (rather than a series of interviews) is to be conducted with each respondent (Bernard, 1988).

Consistent with the approach used in a recent study of sex workers (Campbell, 2000), the first part of the interview consisted of asking about the respondent's family background and personal history. The second part of the interview focused on conditions of work and the last part consisted of perceptions of HIV risk, sexual practices and condom use. An interview guide consisting of questions on topics such as educational, marital and family background, harassment and sexual violence, stigma, alcohol use, sexual behavior, condom use and knowledge of AIDS was prepared. This guide was developed based on a review of the literature and based on Scrimshaw's (1990) recommendations for interviewing sex workers. After introducing topics of interest for the study, the interviewer allowed the flow of the conversation to guide the interview (rather than ensuring that each question on the guide be answered) and probed the respondent to explore topics of interest for this study.

Because of the clandestine and private nature of the sale of sex and because many sex workers do not want to be identified, it is very difficult (if not impossible) to select a representative sample of sex workers. Instead we decided to interview women at two types of locations where it is known that men purchase sex: nightclubs and streets outside major hotels. Although the number of women involved in sex work is unknown, it is thought that many more women sell sex in nightclubs than on the street. Lusaka nightclubs are distinct from bars because they have music and dancing and charge an entry fee. Some men may take their girlfriends or (more rarely) their wives to nightclubs, but many men visit nightclubs on their own or with other male friends.

Although the majority of men in nightclubs are Zambian, other Africans and Europeans also frequent nightclubs. Men who frequent street-based sex workers outside major hotels might be international visitors on short-term assignments to Zambia, Zambians of high socioeconomic status, or men of Indian or other Asian origin.

In both nightclubs and on the street, sex workers are not difficult to identify because of their dress: they wear short skirts or form-fitting trousers and use heavy make-up. Many of them bleach their skin to look fairer. They can also be identified by their behavior: sex workers at nightclubs often sit by themselves waiting to be approached; some go and sit next to a man who might purchase a beer for them.

“Before he proposes sex, he must first buy me some beer. I cannot speak to him without his buying me some beer first. Speech itself is a kind of marketing” (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

After having a beer, the man and the woman might leave the nightclub together.

Street-based sex workers outside hotels stand by themselves on the street, peering carefully into cars that pass by. At times they might call out or run after a car that has slowed down while driving past them. Although their manner of dress is similar to sex workers in nightclubs, street-based sex workers outside hotels tend to wear more expensive looking clothes.

A convenience sample of sex workers was taken at two nightclubs and on the street outside two hotels. At nightclubs the assistance of the bartender was sought to introduce the researcher to a sex worker. The interviewer introduced herself as a researcher who was conducting a study on sex work. Informed consent was obtained from respondents who were assured that their identities would be kept completely confidential. Permission was taken to record the interviews.

Fourteen interviews of sex workers based in nightclubs and six interviews of street-based sex workers were completed. Seven respondents refused to participate in the study. Five refusals were from women at nightclubs and two from street-based women. These women did not want to be identified as sex workers and did not want their interviews to

be recorded. Several of the women who agreed to participate in the study were initially quite concerned about being publicly exposed or persecuted:

“Won’t your interviews come out on the radio?” (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 27).

“Won’t you take us to the police with this interview?” (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 22).

Interviews were conducted in Bemba, Nyanja, and English. Bemba is the largest ethnic group in Zambia (36%), followed by Nyanja (19%) (Central Statistical Office, 1997). English is the official language of Zambia. Interviews usually took 30-60 minutes. A monetary incentive of K10,000 (at the time of writing, K2,500 was approximately US\$1) was given to the women interviewed, to compensate them for the potential loss of income due to the time taken by the interview. Although there were a few exceptions, most women discussed their work freely.

Data transcription and analysis

All interviews were transcribed into English by a graduate student from the University of Zambia who was fluent in English, Bemba, and Nyanja. The transcripts were forwarded to the interviewer for review. The interviewer checked the transcripts for errors and necessary corrections were made.

The order of topics covered in the interview guide was followed in the presentation of the findings. After reviewing the transcripts carefully, the authors developed sub-headings that highlighted the main findings of each topic. A document was prepared with respondents’ quotes placed within sub-headings that we had developed. From this document, quotes that most clearly highlighted the sub-headings were selected for the first draft of this report. To ensure that the quotes were not taken out of context, we located all quotes in the original transcripts. This allowed us to review the context in which the subject was discussed, and to expand the quote and/or add additional information about the context as needed.

Sample description

Respondents were between 19 and 27 years of age. Eight of them had been married at some point and one woman was still married. The remaining eleven women had never been married. Six of the formerly married women reported that their husband had left them for other women. Two of these women were abandoned because they had been unable to get pregnant. The husbands of two other formerly married women had passed away. Eleven of the twenty women had one or more children. All twenty respondents had completed at least five years of formal schooling but none had completed more than nine years of schooling.

Based on their behavior and manner of approaching their work, street-based and nightclub-based sex workers seemed quite distinct from each other. Although one street based sex worker sometimes visited nightclubs, and one nightclub-based sex worker went to the streets when there was no business in nightclubs, generally street and nightclub-based sex workers saw each other as being quite different. Nightclub-based sex workers felt that street-based sex work exposed women to greater physical danger.

“No, I don’t go to streets. The police would beat you up if they found you there” (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 23).

Several sex workers in nightclubs were motivated by the desire to meet a man who would marry them, while street-based sex workers perceived what they did purely as work. Street-based sex workers appeared aware of the dangers associated with sex work on the street. Street-based women did not drink alcohol while were working so that they could maintain control over themselves.

“I don’t want to go to bars. Because if I get drunk, I may sleep with someone without condoms” (street-based Nyanja sex workers, aged 22).

Streetgirls were considerably more likely to use condoms than nightclub-based sex workers.

RESULTS

Personal history: poor education and limited employment opportunities

Consistent with findings from previous studies on Zambia (Hansen, 1984; Mwale and Burnard, 1992; Campbell and Kelly, 1995; Agha, 1998), our findings reflect the importance of marriage in providing economic support for women. In describing their personal histories, women stated why they had not been able to obtain higher education when they were young. Divorced/widowed women talked about how the breakdown of their marriage pushed them towards sex work. Nightclub-based sex workers were, in part, motivated by the search for a permanent partner.

Low educational achievement

Several women explained that they had been unable to get higher education (none of the women in our sample had more than nine years of schooling) because their father remarried after divorcing their natural mother. Subsequent mistreatment by their stepmother led to emotional and psychological insecurity because they did not know where they would live. Some women mentioned that the death of their father and the inability of relatives to support their schooling led them to give up their education.

As children we remained with dad. However, we were not staying well with our stepmother who used to beat us up a lot and tell us to go to our mother (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

Some parents could not keep their daughters in school because of poverty. A few girls tried to provide for their schooling expenses by earning an income through the sale of sex but were not able to sustain their education by this means.

At first I meant to raise money to pay for my education. My friends would take me with them until I got pregnant (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

Although most girls dropped out of school because of demographic and/or economic instability, a few were not interested in education. They reported that they had been too playful at school and had been more interested in having fun, by which they meant dressing up and going out. These respondents stated that they had needed money to have fun.

I just concentrated on being playful instead of concentrating on school... Often when I was given money for my bus fare, I used to misuse it and walked to and from school... Meanwhile, at school I was sent away for failing to pay (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

I cannot lie and say that my parents did not support me in my education. Actually they did all they could to ensure that I was educated. However, I had friends who had some bad habits but were dressing very well. I began to envy my friends. So I began to ask them to take me with them wherever it was they used to go. That was how I started (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

Pregnancy was an important reason for leaving school. One woman reported that the man who got her pregnant was married and did not assume financial responsibility for their child. She was forced to drop out of school to take care of her child. Another woman left school and married the man who made her pregnant but the marriage did not last. In one case, the father supported his child for several years until he lost his job.

Limited employment opportunities

Women stated that because of their poor educational qualifications they could not find formal sector employment.

I am not educated myself. My family is poor and there is nothing else I can do. I may say that I can go to braid hair in a salon where I would be paid K50,000 per month (US\$20). But how do I pay for rent? Mealie-meal (a maize porridge) is expensive – it is now K20,000. I have to pay K40,000 for rent and yet I would only get 50,000 as income. I don't want to have to steal from anyone. This is why I come to the streets (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 22).

Since I couldn't find a job, I needed toiletries for myself, soap for my child, and my parents couldn't cope... Its not very good work and in my case I keep looking for (other) employment. (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 21)

Several sex workers reported that they were looking for other means of employment. They felt that the type of employment they could get (such as that of shop assistant or house-girl) did not provide them enough income to take care of their dependents.

I have to pay K50,000 every month for my mother's house. Even if I was to get employment, what would I do with the K40,000 or K50,000 that employers pay. My children have to go to nursery school where I pay K30,000 per term (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

Initiation of sex work

As indicated earlier, several girls started sex work while they were still in school. Some of these young women started sex work because they wanted money to have fun, some because they wanted money to support their education while others did not believe that they had good future prospects after their parents had died. One girl ran away from her home after the death of both parents and her inability to continue her education. Another girl ran away from home because her parents were too strict. She started living with her friends first and then started sex work to support herself.

I was born in 1973. I was at a secondary school where I went up to Grade Nine because I did not have financial support from my uncle after the death of both my parents in 1989. I stayed for one year waiting to repeat Grade 9 after I had failed. I then began to see how some of my friends seemed to be having almost every necessity after going to the streets. I therefore joined them and began to move around with truck drivers ferrying maize to Mongu and Lusaka. I saw life as very good when I was introduced to Rose's¹. I decided therefore that I would make Lusaka my residing place. With a few friends we looked for a small house and saw that type of life. Up to today I am still leading that type of life (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 23).

[My father's] new wife was not treating us well... It was the way she was treating us that compelled me to such (selling sex) behavior (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26)

Several women who had never been married saw sex work as a way of finding a man who would take care of them. These women would prefer to go out with only one man in a night, usually a man they had been with before, and spend the night with him.

I would get married and not even refuse. We patronize nightclubs because you can find a man to marry you there. This cannot happen if you are just at home (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 19).

Well, men don't come to our homes to marry us. Therefore, we go out hoping that we find a decent man to look after each other (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 22)

Especially if you have a permanent boyfriend, he is the only one you would go with (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 23).

¹ a fictitious name used by the author for a nightclub in Lusaka

Sex workers who had been married stated that they had started selling sex after they were abandoned by their spouse or after their spouse died and they lost their main source of income. Because of their inability to compete in the job market, these women suddenly found themselves without the means to support themselves and their dependents.

I resorted to prostitution because I was divorced and I saw that I needed to look after myself, my three children, my mother and my younger siblings. I am the first of nine children and there is no other person that can take care of them (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 27).

Working conditions: how contact is established; place and type of sex; sex worker preferences for clients

In Lusaka, contact between the customer and the sex worker is direct and is not mediated by a pimp. In the case of street-based sex workers, a client drives up to a woman and discusses the type of sex he wants, negotiates the price and discusses where they would go. The sex worker gets in the car and they drive off to a secluded place where they may have sex in the car, or they may go to a hotel where the client might rent a room. At a nightclub, a client may offer to buy a beer for a sex worker who may have sat down next to him. While drinking beer, the client and sex worker would agree upon the type of sex, the price and the venue. After finishing their beers, sex workers leave the nightclub with their clients.

Before you arrange with them you have to sit with them to talk. They will come to your table and greet you, ask you your name while he buys you some beer. As you drink, he begins to propose to you (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26)

We may go to a hotel room or to a client's house or just in the car. You stop somewhere where it is safe and a bit dark, where nobody can see you. Then you (have sex) (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

I will lead him to a toilet of a nearby nightclub ...sometimes it is a vehicle with tinted glasses. Afterwards you act like nothing happened and get back to look for more men (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26)

In most instances, sex workers do not take clients back to their homes. This has implications for violence and condom use. Because sex workers are usually in an unfamiliar environment, they are unable to ask for assistance if there is a need.

Most sexual encounters involved vaginal sex, but masturbation, oral and anal sex are also practiced. Women reported preferring vaginal sex to anal sex because it is less painful but they could earn more money if they consented to anal sex. They perceived themselves to be working in a competitive environment and did not want to lose clients.

Sex workers associated their clients' sexual preferences with their cultural backgrounds and priced different sexual acts accordingly. Oral sex was priced the highest because European men preferred it. Anal sex was priced below oral sex because Indian men preferred it. Vaginal sex was priced lowest because this was preferred by Zambian men, who were the majority of their clients (and came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds). Unprotected sex costs twice as much or more than protected sex. Oral sex was usually unprotected.

White men usually want to be sucked or put their penis between the breasts (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

About three quarters of Indians and Somalis like anal sex. These can give you any amount you demand ... others will just want to play with your body. Whites like blowjobs (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 27)

Most of them are Zambians ... most of them like normal sex. Others just like to be played with until they are satisfied (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

For K10,000, I use a condom. If I have to do without a condom, I demand anything from K20,000 (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

The number of clients per night was determined by the financial need of the woman and by the type of the client she could get that night. Well-paying clients were preferred because a sex worker would only need to have sex with one well-paying client in a night. When they were unable to get a well-paying client, nightclub-based sex workers would adopt a strategy they referred to as "short-time sex". This was a strategy used to earn money by having several clients in one night and meant having sex at the nightclub, or at a place close so that they could return soon after having sex (and get another client).

Just one man, if you sleep with a white man. If you get yourself a generous man he will give you lots of money (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 27).

At times when I mean to make more money, I tell the man that I don't want to go far away. So we just go behind the building. If he has sex with me for a short time while we are standing, I demand about K10,000 then I come back and begin afresh waiting for another man (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

However, short-time sex was more dangerous because it often involved unprotected anal intercourse.

Most of the "short-times" we use the behind (anus). This is because when you go for short-time you cannot just remove all your clothes and sleep. That may be too risky because you may be found by people. That is why we prefer the back. If I am wearing a pair of trouser like I am now, all I would do is remove my trousers down slightly... There and then, you will have intercourse (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26)

Women had a preference for regular clients not only because this meant a consistent income but, by implying that woman's desirability, it increased her social standing amongst her peers. For periods, sex workers would live with a man who they met through their work and who became their regular partner. Living with a man increased a sex worker's self-esteem by making her feel desired.

So I tried to find another white guy. But I know that maybe this is not the way I should find him. I need to change. I am also proud of myself. I know I've got a nice body. I know that I am beautiful. I know that when I am dressed up, I mean like any other lady, I look beautiful. (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24)

Several sex workers preferred younger men because of the potential of their becoming permanent partners whereas others preferred older men because they were kinder, paid more money and were gentler. However, sex workers could not afford to be picky when they needed money.

When you are doing business, you will not choose the men or ask them questions. Worse still, when you have drunk some beer (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26)

Working conditions and consequences: harassment, violence and low self-esteem

Harassment and violence

Client and police harassment was part of the daily routine of street-based sex workers' lives. Clients harassed them by not paying them after having had sex or by abandoning them far away from where they had met. At times, passers by would throw stones at street-based sex workers.

To be on the streets is a very hard job. Because here we get beaten up, we get harassed, we get picked by these cops to sleep in cells. Sometimes people just come with stones, throwing stones on us (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

Others may sleep with you, then abandon you far away without even paying you (street-based Bemba sex worker, aged 19).

Others are violent and start beating you up. Maybe after fucking you he will take you to a place like Leopard's Hill Cemetery. He may not even pay you and even push you out from the moving car. He may even take out a pistol (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 27).

Some men are savages, especially the younger ones... They beat you up and threaten you with a knife to have sex (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 23).

Women were fearful of being raped by gangs of young men. Several women reported having been forced to have sex with four or five men. One woman reported having been abducted by a gang of thieves and being repeatedly raped for one week.

Others will be about four and all have sex with you... At times when you go out with one, you find a large group waiting (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24)

The young ones sometimes force you to have sex with a group of about five (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

Some women had tried to resist physical abuse by fighting back but this resulted in heightening physical violence against them.

We began to quarrel. The man was a savage, but he found that I was equally a savage. We went outside fighting and naked until someone came to separate us (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

Women who had been forced to have sex without a condom were fearful of having acquired HIV.

He got a cab and arranged with the driver without my knowledge. The driver parked near the sewerage ponds. There the man said that he had no condoms and that he never used condoms. He slept with me without condoms, got the K10,000 that he had paid me and beat me up. I am afraid because I am not sure about my status (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 24).

The harassment and violence women faced on a daily basis lowered their self-esteem.

Rejection, stigmatization and low self-esteem

Sex workers felt highly stigmatized because of their work. Several women had been rejected by their families and were notably lacking in self-esteem. They were very conscious of being judged harshly by society and wished that their lives had been different. On occasion, they were asked to perform humiliating sexual acts.

My parents say that they do not want a person of my character to visit their home. I think I would be axed if they saw me at their home (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

I feel sometimes horrible (that) they do not care about me. All they want is to use me because I am young (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

We are not happy with this kind of life... We are standing here looking stupid, but it is the suffering that brings us here. So do not laugh at us (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 22).

At one time, one man wanted me to sleep with his dog. ... I saw a dog come from the bedroom. The man told me to bend. I told him I could not sleep with a dog and left (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 23).

Some sex workers argued that sex work can be justified, and perhaps should be respected, when it is used as a means of survival, but not otherwise.

There are some people who come out to the streets only because they want to make money to go for discotheques. For people like me, if you came to my house you would agree that I need money because I am suffering (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 22).

Sex workers' lack of control over their working conditions has important implications for the HIV prevention, because when environmental conditions exercise powerful constraints on behavior, they emerge as the overriding determinants (Bandura, 1986).

Knowledge of AIDS, personal risk perception, condom use, experience with STDs

Knowledge of a disease and the perception of being at risk of contracting it are factors that support the practice of preventive behaviors, if an individual is enabled by his/her environment to adopt healthy behaviors (Tawil et al., 1995). Sex workers were cognizant of AIDS. They considered themselves at high risk of contracting HIV but were unable to practice consistent condom use because of the imbalance of power between themselves and their clients and because of their poverty and inability to negotiate condom use.

Awareness of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS

Several women had experienced STDs and unwanted pregnancies and knew that these were caused by their having had unprotected sex.

I have suffered from STDs... Of course we have become pregnant simply by saying let me try this once without a condom (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

I have contracted a disease from a man (Nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 23).

It (pregnancy) was an accident. I was staying with a white man for one month, I did not know that I was pregnant until I was told at the hospital that I was two months pregnant (street-based Bemba sex worker, aged 19).

Most sex workers were aware of the dangers of AIDS and STDs and had received messages concerning AIDS through a variety of sources. Several women knew other sex workers who had died of AIDS.

I have heard from radio, TV, and from people. Sometimes people give us written material on the topic (Nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

There are some of my friends who I have seen, they have died here of AIDS... other people may say that they have bewitched her. But through this life, since 'ICASA' (AIDS) came, you can always tell. Oh people are dying fast because of AIDS. I have seen about four girls (die) since I have been standing here (doing street-based work) (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

ICASA is the acronym for the International Conference on AIDS and STDs in Africa, which was held in Lusaka in September 1999. The fact that the term ICASA was used as a synonym for AIDS suggests that the conference played an important role of increasing HIV/AIDS awareness among sex workers in Lusaka.

Personal risk perception

Sex workers' perception of being at risk of contracting HIV was high and the majority of them reported using condoms when they could. At the same time, most women believed that they could not exercise influence over their client when he did not want to use a condom. One woman had started taking traditional medicine as a cure under the presumption that she had already contracted HIV.

I was afraid that I might have contracted AIDS, so I thought I might as well begin to take medication (African potato) (Nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

However, the financial circumstances of many sex workers were so dire that they chose to consciously ignore their worries about AIDS in order to be able to continue working.

I have heard a lot about it, that it kills. I have heard from radios, posters etc. I know it kills. But we think of AIDS only after we have had the sex and the money, and the man is gone. Otherwise before that, I do not think about AIDS (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

We don't think of that (sickness) while one is on the job. It is only when you are back home that you begin to worry (nightclub-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

Condom use

Although most women expressed the desire to use condoms consistently they recounted instances where they were unable to use them. Street-based sex workers were more

likely to report condom use, probably because they were more formal in their encounters with clients and did not express any expectation of meeting a potential marital partner through their work. Women with children or dependents were more concerned about condom use. Some women even made clients use two condoms simultaneously.

I always carry condoms because I know this is the only way I can protect my life (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 24).

Some clients may demand for unprotected sex, but as far as I am concerned, I flatly refuse. There would be no one to take care of the children if I died now (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 27).

I will not have sex without condoms. I will make him wear condoms. If I see that his health is not very good, I will make wear even two condoms (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 22).

In my case, I prefer that my client wears two condoms at the same time (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 27).

In spite of wanting to use condoms, sex workers did practice unprotected sex. Sex workers felt that the decision to use a condom was not theirs to make due to the circumstances in which sex occurred, and due to the fact that they could earn more money through unprotected sex.

If you have many problems that need money, one is compelled to have unprotected sex. Therefore, even if I find a client with K10,000 for unprotected sex, you just have to accept (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 23).

Another barrier to condom use was the stigma associated with condom use. One nightclub-based sex worker described how she had hesitated to suggest condom use to a client because she feared being labeled as HIV positive. Because of their fear of being stigmatized as someone with HIV, she went against her best judgment and did not use a condom.

If you suggest that you use condoms, they will say that you are diseased and that is why you prefer using condoms. In that case you have to pretend that all is well despite worrying that the man is diseased. Therefore, you will tell him that you are not diseased and ask him his status and he will also say that he is not diseased. Thus, we will have unprotected sex (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

Although regular customers provided a consistent income and increase a sex workers social standing, they often posed a problem by asking for unprotected sex. The sex worker would then have to make a difficult decision. Refusing to have sex with a regular client without a condom would mean losing that client. While street-based sex workers reported that they refused to have unprotected sex even with regular clients, night-club based sex workers indicated that they did have unprotected sex with someone familiar to them.

Some regular customers demand for unprotected sex after we have known each other for some time. I still refuse and such clients stop seeing you (street-based Nyanja sex worker, aged 27).

I cannot sleep with a man whom I've met for the first time without using a condom, unless you know each other or maybe he is a boyfriend (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 22).

Experience with STDs

As anticipated, several sex workers reported having experienced STDs. They also indicated that for treatment, they would usually go to a herbalist rather than to the public sector clinics.

A few men suffer from syphilis. We usually go to herbalists who give you medicine that induces diarrhea and cures you. We rarely go to the clinic (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26).

Several women reported using traditional medicine as a way of preventing STDs.

You know as prostitutes, we use traditional medicine for protection (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 26)

There is that medicine where you are scratched with a razor blade. Then you will not have STDs (even if you don't use a condom) (nightclub-based Bemba sex worker, aged 19).

DISCUSSION

Although there is heterogeneity in the experiences that lead women to adopt sex work and in how they perceive their work, several important patterns emerge from this study. About half the women we interviewed began sex work after the failure of their marriage and their inability to find employment that would support them and their dependents. The rest of the women started sex work during adolescence. Some girls started sex work to pay for their schooling after their parents had died or their parents could not continue to pay for their education. The remarriage of their father, and the insecurity of not knowing who they would live with lowered some girls' expectations for life and facilitated the adoption of sex work. Several sex workers reported that, as girls, they had wanted to have some independence and fun. Failure to attain higher education limited their employment opportunities. Their low educational achievement was determined by parental divorce, orphanhood, leaving school due to pregnancy, and/or a lack of interest in education.

In their daily lives, sex workers come across a barrage of negative societal and individual attitudes. The societal attitudes are expressed in terms of the illegality of sex work as well as the constant harassment and mistreatment of sex workers by the police authorities. Misogynistic attitudes are expressed when sex workers are beaten up, gang raped or when they are stoned by passers by. Because of their hostile work environment, sex workers have no recourse to protection when physical/sexual violence is directed toward them.

In the face of strong situational constraints, an individual's ability to practice healthy behaviors becomes limited (Bandura, 1986). Thus, societal attitudes towards commercial sex have an enormous influence on the health of women who sell sex. Removal of the negative stereotypes associated with sex workers in the mass media would be a beginning, but long-term changes in the sexual socialization of men and women in Zambian society are necessary. The causes of sexual violence and misogynistic attitudes toward women should be addressed through debates within Zambian society. Although

legislation to legalize commercial sex would be an important public policy intervention, such changes may not be possible in a society where there is strong resistance to public discussions of sexuality. However, mechanisms must be developed to reduce punitive measures taken against sex workers, at both a societal and an individual level.

On one level, the findings of this study are gloomy: they suggest the existence of overwhelming barriers to the adoption of preventive behaviors, especially among nightclub-based sex workers. At another level, the higher level of implementation of preventive behaviors by street-based sex workers provides a possible roadmap for interventions targeted at nightclub-based sex workers in Lusaka.

Indeed, one of the important findings of this study is that street-based sex workers outside hotels are more successful in implementing condom use than nightclub-based sex workers, even though street-based women encounter greater discrimination and police harassment. This could possibly be due to the self-selection of women who sell sex on the street: women who do street-based work may already have crossed many difficult hurdles including being willing to stand in the public view and be identified as a sex worker. The same personal resources that allow sex workers to publicly acknowledge that they are sex workers possibly enable them to practice preventive sexual behaviors. That is, since it is public knowledge that they are sex workers, there is an implicit knowledge that there is a potential risk of STD/HIV infection, which makes it easier to convince clients to use protection.

Nightclub-based sex workers do not openly acknowledge that they engage in commercial sex. Instead, they place their better judgment concerning the need to use condoms subordinate to the sexual desires of men. This is probably because they desire “conventional respectability” in their interactions with men (Campbell, 2000). Their motivation to find men who would marry them, thus giving them marital respectability symbolizes the importance they place on how society judges them.

Efforts to strengthen networks among nightclub-based sex workers may enable them to find the personal and environmental resources necessary to implement preventive sexual

behaviors. Experiences in several African countries show that peer education programs can be effective at promoting sexual behavior changes among sex workers (Laukamm-Josken et al., 2000; Walden et al., 1999). Peer education interventions may strengthen cohesion among nightclub-based sex workers and assist them in developing a professional identity that will allow them to implement safer sexual behaviors. Under these circumstances, it is likely that successful interventions can be implemented. However, while it is important to modify the personal determinants of behavior, this study shows the importance of environmental determinants of behavior.

A useful way of reaching sex workers or motivating them to participate in peer education interventions would be to provide them affordable STD testing treatment. Several sex workers reported having experienced STDs but most went to herbalists for treatment. Provision of voluntary counseling and testing for HIV to sex workers may also be an important behavior change mechanism for sex workers.

Research has shown that there is a large diversity of commercial sex work, both in terms of behaviors and the identities of those involved (de Zaluondo et al., 1991; Gatter, 1995; Wolffers et al., 1999). Our study did not aim to present a comprehensive picture of the types of conditions of sex work in Lusaka or of the range of different types of women involved in sex work: we used a convenience sample of women in only two types of locations where women sell sex in Lusaka. It is possible that the experiences of sex workers in neighborhood bars are different from those of sex workers in nightclubs or on streets outside major hotels. Thus, findings of this study must not be generalized to represent the situation in Lusaka or in Zambia. However, these findings do help develop our understanding of situations where sexual risk occurs and enable us to focus on structures that impede risk avoidance.

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