



Benefits and Risks of Participation in HIV Research: Perspectives of Female Sex Workers in Guatemala

Background

Over 20 years into the HIV epidemic, female sex workers remain disproportionately impacted by HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Although HIV research with sex workers is crucial to inform prevention, research with stigmatized and criminalized populations, such as sex workers, often raises ethical challenges, which are not well understood in many contexts.

The Question

What are the perceived risks and benefits of participation in HIV-related research for female sex workers in Guatemala?

The Study

The research team, led by the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative's Dr. Shira Goldenberg, drew upon data collected from **focus groups and in-depth interviews with 33 female sex workers in Tecún Umán, Guatemala, between June 2013 and February 2014**. Eligible participants were females over age 18 who reported exchanging sex for money, drugs, shelter or goods in the past month, who spoke Spanish, and were able to provide informed consent. This project was overseen by a Community Advisory Board and was conducted alongside outreach with HIV prevention organization EDUCAVIDA, which serves female sex workers and other populations.

The Results

Sex workers reported risks of participation in HIV research including:

- Fear of public disclosure related to HIV,
- HIV and sex work stigma (internalized and community).

Sex workers reported benefits of participation in HIV research including:

- Access to HIV/STI testing and prevention
- Trusting and positive relationships with research staff.

Q: Why do you think they [other sex workers] chose not to participate?

A: "I think it must be fear or the thought "what will people say of me?"

FG, age 30

Control exerted by managers in indoor sex work venues sometimes promoted, and sometimes constrained research participation.

Research Implications

- As trust between researchers and sex workers is important, longitudinal studies conducted in meaningful partnership with sex work communities, (e.g. with a Community Advisory Board and ongoing follow-up visits) are recommended to foster ethical and appropriate HIV research.
- Continued efforts to reduce stigma, engage managers, and build and reinforce reciprocal relationships between sex work communities and researchers remain essential.

Goldenberg SA, Rivera Mindt M, Rocha Jimenez T, Brouwer KC, Morales Miranda S, Fisher CB. *Structural and Interpersonal Benefits and Risks of Participation in HIV Research: Perspectives of Female Sex Workers in Guatemala*. *Ethics & Behaviour*, 2014.