

Risk factors associated with HIV/AIDS infection among Itinerant Women Entrepreneurs in Mbeya Region, Tanzania

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Abstract

Due to social, cultural, and economic structures, women in many developing countries have low socio-economic status compared to men. Micro-enterprise is considered as one important way for women to gain economic empowerment. However, in their endeavour to empower themselves, women risk the danger of contracting HIV/AIDS as they are more vulnerable to the disease due to the nature of their work, which compels them to travel from place to place to purchase raw materials for their businesses and resale the goods. Due to poverty, some women take advantage during their travels and involve in sex, which expose them to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. In addition, during their absence their husbands could engage in multiple sexual partnership, hence increasing their risk. Women's financial dependency coupled with their precarious working locations such as truck stops, in trading towns and working after dark, may influence their involvement in 'paid' relationships with transient men and thus increase their risk.

The objective of this paper is to investigate risk factors associated with HIV/AIDS infection among itinerant women entrepreneurs (IWEs). Specifically, the paper examines: incidences where IWEs were asked to provide sexual favours by law enforcers, licensing and tax officials; number of sexual partners possessed by IWEs; and IWEs awareness of HIV/AIDS and condom use;. The paper also determine associations between types of business, location, sources of capital, returns from the businesses, distance travelled to purchase trading goods (merchandise) and some HIV/AIDS infection risk factors.

The paper relies on a cross-sectional study from a randomly selected sample of 220 IWEs in Mbeya Region Tanzania. Selection of markets/business centres where IWEs operate was done purposively depending on the volume of business in the markets/business centres. District Trade Officers in the study area assisted in identifying markets/business centres with large volume of transaction. IWES in the areas of study were first stratified according to

types of their businesses. Samples for each stratum was then picked randomly since most of them were scattered in market/business places making it difficult to have any systematic approach of selection. Indexes were used to determine knowledge of HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention methods as well as sexual behaviours. Index of sexual behaviour was determined using seven variables such as ever had sex, condom use during first and last sexual intercourse, consistence use of condom during every sexual intercourse, number of sexual partners, incidences of sexual abuse, and exchange of sex for business favours.

Results show that majority (92.9%) of IWEs in the study area were below age 40. Over half of the respondents (55.4%) were married before their 20th birthday. The median age at first marriage was 19.1. Most of IWEs (86.7%) had some primary education or below. Business wise majority (65.6%) were involved in food vending, local brewing, selling clothes & domestic appliances and tailoring. Over half of them (65%) conduct their businesses in market or business centres and streets, 17.3% in local brew shops, while 13.3% do their business at bus stops and 4.4% of the sample was found doing their business at milling machines. In terms of sexual behaviour knowledge towards HIV/AIDS infection is high although over half of them (55.8%) were involved in high-risk undertakings. High-risk undertakings were closely associated with levels of education, types of business and sources of capital. These findings call for specific strategies to address problems of itinerant women entrepreneurs in contracting HIV/AIDS.

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