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Sex and Silhouette: Unveiling HPV Risks and Protective Measures in the Lives of Sex Workers

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Abstract

Background: Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a prevalent sexually transmitted infection and a leading cause of cervical cancer. Despite vaccines and screening, prevention remains inadequate among high-risk populations such as female sex workers, who face occupational exposure, stigma, and limited access to healthcare in the Philippines.

Aim: This study explored the lived experiences of female sex workers regarding HPV awareness, perceived risks, and protective measures, and identified social and structural factors influencing prevention and healthcare access.

Research design: Narrative qualitative research

Samples and sample size: Fifteen (15) female sex workers aged 18 and above from SOCCSKSARGEN and Davao Regions were purposively selected.

Result: Two main categories emerged: HPV Risks and Protective Measures. Participants had limited knowledge, faced condom negotiation challenges, fear of stigma, and poor vaccination access. Despite this, they engaged in protective practices including condom use, personal hygiene, peer support, and periodic health check-ups.

Conclusion: Female sex workers remain marginalized in HPV prevention. Inclusive, stigma-free education, accessible vaccination, and community-based interventions are essential to promote health equity and reduce HPV-related morbidity.

Keywords: Human Papillomavirus (HPV), Sex Workers, Protective Measures, Vaccination, Stigma, Healthcare Access

Introduction

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most prevalent sexually transmitted infections worldwide and is a major cause of cervical cancer among women. HPV infection is often asymptomatic, which contributes to delayed diagnosis and increased transmission, particularly among populations with limited access to preventive health services. Despite the availability of effective HPV vaccines and screening programs, awareness and utilization remain low in many vulnerable groups. Female sex workers are considered a high-risk population for HPV infection due to frequent sexual exposure, inconsistent condom use, and limited control over sexual decision-making. In the Philippine setting, this risk is further intensified by social stigma, discrimination, poverty, and restricted access to healthcare services. Many sex workers avoid health facilities because of fear of judgment and lack of trust in healthcare providers, resulting in poor uptake of vaccination and screening. Understanding the lived experiences of female sex workers is essential in identifying gaps in HPV awareness, perceived risks, and existing protective practices. Exploring these experiences provides valuable insights for nurses and public health practitioners in developing inclusive, stigma-free, and

culturally sensitive interventions aimed at reducing HPV-related morbidity.

Methodology

A narrative qualitative research design was used in this study to explore the lived experiences of female sex workers regarding HPV risks and protective measures. Fifteen (15) female sex workers aged 18 years and above from the SOCCSKSARGEN and Davao Regions were selected using purposive sampling. Participants who were actively engaged in sex work and willing to share their experiences were included in the study.

Data were collected through in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted in the participants' preferred languages. An interview guide was used to facilitate discussion on HPV awareness, perceived risks, healthcare experiences, and preventive practices. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results

The analysis revealed two major categories: HPV Risks and Protective Measures. Participants demonstrated limited

knowledge and misconceptions about HPV, often confusing it with other sexually transmitted infections. Many reported difficulty in negotiating condom use due to client resistance and economic dependence. Fear of stigma, discrimination, and judgment in healthcare settings was commonly reported, leading to delayed or avoided health-seeking behavior. Despite these challenges, participants reported engaging in protective practices such as condom use when possible, maintaining personal hygiene, seeking peer support, and undergoing periodic health check-ups. These practices reflected adaptive coping and resilience amid vulnerability.

Discussion

The findings indicate that female sex workers experience significant barriers to HPV prevention, including lack of accurate health information, limited access to vaccination, and stigma within healthcare settings. These results are consistent with existing literature highlighting the exclusion of sex workers from mainstream sexual health programs. The difficulty in condom negotiation underscores the power imbalance between sex workers and clients, which increases susceptibility to infection. However, the presence of coping strategies and self-initiated protective behaviors suggests that sex workers possess health-seeking potential when supportive and nonjudgmental services are available. Nurses play a crucial role in addressing these gaps through education, advocacy, and community-based interventions.

Conclusion

After detailed analysis, the study concludes that female sex workers remain highly vulnerable to HPV infection due to limited awareness, stigma, and restricted access to preventive healthcare services. Although participants demonstrated resilience through personal protective practices and peer support, these measures are insufficient without systemic support. The study emphasizes the need for inclusive, stigma-free health education, accessible HPV vaccination and screening services, and nurse-led community interventions to promote health equity and protect this vulnerable population.

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