

HARiS - HIV and AIDS Response Indicator Survey 2019 for Female Sex Worker

Background

Female sex workers (FSW) is one of the at-risk populations of HIV infection. In order to keep track the HIV prevalence and the related risky behaviours among this population, the first Community Based Risk Behavioural and Seroprevalence Survey for Female Sex Worker in Hong Kong (CRISP) was launched in 2006 and repeated in 2009. Both surveys showed low HIV prevalence with the results of 0.19% and 0.05% respectively.

Despite the low HIV prevalence, a regular public health surveillance programme should be in place to closely monitor the situation of HIV infection among FSW. A similar integrated biobehavioural survey for FSW was therefore developed in 2013 by incorporating into the newly launched HIV/AIDS Response Indicator Survey (HARiS) programme. The HARiS for FSW was repeated in 2014, 2015 and 2017. This year, its fifth round was conducted via commissioning to the Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong. The results were summarised as below.

Methods

Participants were recruited via centre-based HIV Voluntary, Counselling and Testing (VCT) services (by 4 NGOs) and during the outreach sessions (4 NGOs) from June to August 2019. Any female who had ever had sex with someone for money, drugs or other goods in the past 1 year was eligible and be invited to complete an interviewer-administered structured questionnaire. The respondents were also asked to provide urine specimen to the Department of Health for HIV antibody test on a surveillance purpose.

Results

(A) Characteristics of participants

A total of 579 respondents were recruited (centre-based : 343; outreach : 233). About one-third (31.6%) of respondents had ever worked in a one-woman brothel; 19.7% in karaoke/night clubs, 25.9% had worked in street, 8.1% in bars/pubs, and 4.3% in massage parlors/sauna. A vast majority was Chinese (91.4%) and majority were 30-49 years old (66.7%). More than half (81.2%) had stayed in Hong Kong for more than 3 months in the preceding 6 months.

(B) Sexual behaviours

Condom use rate was 94.9% in the last sexual intercourse with regular clients and 98.3% with casual clients. The condom use rate remained high, as in 2017 (95.6% and 99.1% respectively).

(C) HIV testing behaviours

Among all 579 respondents, 488 (84.3%) had ever received HIV test and 458 (79.1%) knew their last test results. However, only 370 (63.9%) had their last test in the preceding 1 year and 349 (60.3%) knew their last HIV test results.

(D) STI knowledge and attitudes (only for FSW aged 24 or below)

Knowledge and attitudes on sexually transmitted infections (STI) were assessed among the 40 (6.9%) respondents who were aged 24 or below. Most of them correctly answered the following questions: 60% understood that a person's HIV status cannot be seen from the appearance and HIV cannot be transmitted by having meal with an infected person. ; 75.0% and 80.0% correctly pointed out that HIV can be transmitted via transfusion of contaminated blood products and sharing needles respectively. However, only 45.0% knew that STI might lead to infertility if left untreated and 57.5% wrongly believed that STI will always develop symptoms/signs.

(E) Health seeking behaviour for sexually transmitted infections

Among all respondents, 48 (8.3%) had suspected themselves having STI in the past 12 months. Less than half (33.3%) sought proper medical care. The most commonly reported medical care sought was Social Hygiene Clinics (8; 16.7%), followed by public doctors (5; 10.4%), or private doctors (3; 6.3%); while 27.1% sought medical services from NGOs. Self-medication was not uncommon (11; 22.9%) including buying over-the-counter medication or irrigation of vagina with cleaning solution or alcohol.

(F) HIV prevalence

Among the 553 urine specimens tested for HIV antibody, all resulted negative. The HIV prevalence of FSW maintained a low level (0.0%). In HARiS 2013, the HIV prevalence was also 0.0%.

Discussions

1. The condom use rate in last vaginal sex with regular clients and casual clients remained very high among all 5 rounds of HARiS (ranged from 93.6% to 97.4% with regular clients and ranged from 98.1% to 99.1% with casual clients).
2. 84.3% of the respondents had ever been tested for HIV infection, which was similar to HARiS 2017 (87.5%). Testing rate in the past one year had declined from 71.5% in 2017 to 63.9% in this round. Effort to promote regular HIV testing among FSW should be reinforced, particularly the new FSW.
3. 57.5% of young FSW were not aware that STI could be asymptomatic; and 22.9% FSW only self-medicated themselves for STI. The results reflected that their level of knowledge was suboptimal. It indicated the needs to strengthen their STI/HIV knowledge and to ensure that FSW are fully informed of the various STI/HIV medical care available in Hong Kong.

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