

TRANSACTIONAL SEX AND STI BELIEFS AMONG HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE IN PAKISTAN

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Background:

Past research has shown homeless youth to practice condomless transactional sex making them susceptible to STI. However, very little is known about the dynamics of transactional sex involved in such risky sexual encounters. This paper describes the nature of transactional sex, beliefs about STI and sexual practices among homeless youth in Pakistan.

Methods:

In-depth interviews were conducted with 29 homeless young people aged 16-25 years, comprising 21 men, 6 women, and 2 trans-women.

Results:

Participants reported that they exchanged sex for certain material (i.e. money) and nonmaterial (i.e. physical protection, emotional and social support) needs. Their beliefs about STI could be categorized into four different themes. Firstly, participants had some biomedical knowledge regarding STI and could differentiate between often symptomatic and mostly asymptomatic STI. Secondly, they regarded a skinny body and dirty physical appearance as important signs of STI. Thirdly, participants considered premarital sex, promiscuity, and homosexuality as causes of STI, while sexual abstinence, monogamy, and heterosexuality were seen as practices important to prevent STI. Fourthly, they believed, illness and stigma attached to it are different physical and social consequences of contracting STI. Although condom use was considered an important method to prevent STI, participants often practiced condomless sex with their clients (to avoid a reduction in clients' physical pleasure), peers, and intimate partners (to avoid perceptions of mistrust). Participants used alternative strategies to prevent STI, including masturbation, withdrawal, and post-sex anal douching.

Conclusion:

Transactional sex is an important way for homeless youth to meet their material and nonmaterial needs. Engaging in transactional sex can be understood as homeless youth's individual solution to broad structural problems. Homeless youth's inability to ensure condom use during their sexual encounters can be seen as a product of power-imbalance between them and their clients, and emotional dependence on their intimate partners.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None