High Incidence of HIV Infection among Young Women in the Sex and Entertainment Industry in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Kimberly Page-Shafer¹, Saphonn Vonthanak², Kien Serey Phal², Neth Sansothy², Keo Sichan³, Ellen S Stein¹, Mean Chii Vun², John Kaldor⁴
¹University of California, San Francisco, USA
²Kingdom of Cambodia National Centre for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STDs, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
³Cambodian Women’s Development Association, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
⁴National Centre for HIV/AIDS Epidemiology & Clinical Research, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Background and Objectives

Historically female sex workers (FSW) including brothel-based and those working in the entertainment sector have had the highest prevalence of HIV in Cambodia. The Young Women’s Health Study (YWHS) is a prospective study of young women in Phnom Penh who work as FSW or in the ‘entertainment’ sector and are at high risk of and infected with HIV, operated by a research-community collaborative in Phnom Penh.

Methods

• Women ages 15-29 who reported multiple (≥2) sexual partners or engaged in transactional sex were recruited between April-August 2007, interviewed, counseled and tested for HIV infection, and enrolled in prospective study, with quarterly follow up visits for HIV, and STD testing.
• Follow up also includes social, medical and community support provided by public health and community collaborators.
• Baseline data were analyzed to assess prevalence and risk of HIV.
• Longitudinal data were examined to assess HIV incidence.

Results

• 200 women were recruited
• 160 (80%) of women, included HIV negative and positive enrolled and participated in baseline study assessment.
• Median age was 25 years
• 23% of enrolled women were HIV-positive
• Prevalent HIV was significantly associated with type of sex work; women working as brothel-based, or freelance FSW had significantly higher prevalence (32.1%) of HIV than indirect ‘entertainment-based’ women (8.5%)(OR 5.1; 95% CI 1.82, 14.27).
• HIV infection was elevated among women who reported >10 sex partners in the past month (27.2%) compared to those reported ≤10 (13.3%) (OR 2.4 (0.94, 6.30; p=0.06).
• Among the youngest women (16-18 years), 7.7% were HIV-positive compared to 29% of women age 25-29.
• Estimated incidence was 3.4 per 100 person-years of observation (95% CI 1.1-10.5)

Conclusions

Young women who work in as FSW or in the entertainment sector in Phnom Penh have a high prevalence of HIV and ongoing high sexual risk. Incidence of HIV remains high as demonstrated by the high prevalence among very young women and the number of seroconversions over a relatively short follow up. The research-community collaborative are engaged in defining preventive strategies for high risk young women in Phnom Penh.

Financial support: This work was supported by NIH/NIAID grant U01 AI054241-03