

Protecting the unprotected: drug-use, sexual networking and rights in Pakistan's fight against HIV/AIDS

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Background: Pakistan has ratified, or is bound by, international treaties that enshrine fundamental human rights, but it fails to protect groups vulnerable to multiple forms of discrimination. Drug use, sex work, homosexuality and adultery are illegal in Pakistan and carry severe penalties. Yet, Pakistan has one of the highest recorded rates of drug-use in the world and widespread sexual risk-behaviour among vulnerable groups. The HIV epidemic is currently 'concentrated', but the risk of spread may be high. We investigated the nature and extent of HIV-risk practices among vulnerable groups (injecting drug users and sex workers) and how human rights violations may exacerbate these practices.

Methods: Qualitative in-depth interviews with 60 peers (IDU, FSW, TG and MSW) who had also each conducted three interviews with peers themselves. Bio-behavioural survey conducted with 1,800 IDU/sex worker respondents in two cities.

Results: People in each of the high-risk groups showed high levels of sexual and social networking. The highest levels of STI/HIV infection were found among TG/MSWs who also had particularly close networks with IDUs. All groups experienced human rights violations by state and non-state actors, which potentially increased their HIV risk. This paper presents key rights related findings on:

- discrimination and degrading treatment in health service facilities;
- incarceration, harassment and abuse by state actors;
- clients' abuse of sex workers;
- abuse of dignity and respect of the person/social justice.

Conclusions: Discrimination experienced by one high-risk group can increase HIV-risk both for them and other groups because of the extensive sexual and social networking between them. Protection of all vulnerable groups is necessary to achieve the government's public health goals on HIV/AIDS. The paper makes a series of policy and program recommendations including the need to make protection of human rights an integral part of a multi-sector response to HIV/AIDS by state and non-state agencies.

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