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Abstract

CDC1640 - Is it worth it? Opportunity costs of working as peer educators among sex workers

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Issues: Peer educators play a critical role in outreach efforts for many HIV prevention strategies. This study examines the opportunity costs or forgone alternatives of sex workers who work as peer educators in the India AIDS Initiative (Avahan), a large scale targeted intervention for sex workers across 15 districts in southern state of India, Karnataka. Variables examined include paid honoraria, time spent on the project, details of transactional sex, average earnings from all sources, and problems and benefits of working as a peer educator.

Description: Generally, peer educators are selected and trained to provide services to a target population in a ratio of 1:40. All peer educators are paid a honorarium. Their main role is to identify sex workers, build rapport and disseminate knowledge of the project, and provide education on HIV prevention and STI treatment. 15 focus group discussions were held with 191 of 356 project peer educators.

Lessons learned: The daily number of sex work clients for peer educators ranged from 1-2 clients to a maximum of 5-6, with the cost per varying from \$1-\$10. Most peer educators were paid an honorarium of about \$20 per month. Average monthly income from all sources ranged from \$36-\$140. Peer educators work 3-6 hours daily on the project. Non-sex work employment alternatives for sex workers, such as a labourer, would pay \$0.30- \$3 daily. Initially, peer educators face a number of obstacles such as abuse by other sex workers, harassment by clients, and labelling as 'AIDS workers.' However as sex workers are exposed to the project, peers were looked upon with respect and their self-esteem improved.

Recommendations: Sex work continues to pay significantly higher than available employment alternatives. Paid honorarium both compensates for lost income but also assists in retaining peer educators particularly in the early phase of HIV prevention projects.