Mobile phones have become indispensable today. Unlike the landline, mobile phones allow enormous flexibility in communicating with friends, family and business clients. So in effect enable communication anytime and anywhere. In the world of commerce, mobile phones enable easy access with customers which can increase business productivity. It has impacted the way small and micro entrepreneurs run their businesses in urban and rural India, similar to other developing countries; this includes sex work. Initiation into sex work is often the consequence of exploitation. The reason can be one or more factors including poverty, family or personal debt, lack of family support etc. Although the form of exploitation changes following initiation, the exploitation lingers on and is commonly reported by sex workers. Exploitation, including sexual and physical violence is common. This could be because of power inequalities, exclusion from society and that sex workers are often resigned to accept exploitation. In addition, India is a paternalistic society and there is an accepted gender inequality, which further compounds the situation. Exploitation is costly, financially disadvantageous and involves the risk of contracting HIV. Nearly half of the 1140 female sex workers aged 18 to 25 years in Andhra Pradesh reported sexual and physical violence, including being threatened with a weapon, physically beaten and/or being abandoned in a lonely place. The perpetrators could be the client, the middle person (i.e. the pimp) or the police. Mobile phones provide an alternate method to solicit clients directly and discretely (i.e. allow anonymity) away from the community, police and the middle person. Mobile phones allow the sex worker to talk with the clients which may help build trust, comradeship and give the workers a perception of being in control. It also means less financial losses to the middle men, who charge a fee for getting a client. This may be the reason for mobile phone solicitations becoming common in India. Depending upon location, surveys have found that nearly 45% to 80% of sex workers use mobile phone solicitation. However, it is unclear whether this form of solicitation increases their risk contracting HIV as they are more difficult to identify and involve in educational campaigns and preventative programs. A study among 3000 female sex workers from four states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, found that those using phone solicitations although better educated faced more difficulty in negotiating condom use putting them at a higher risk of getting HIV. In the state of Kerala sex workers using mobile phone solicitations were more likely to report inconsistent condom use as compared to those using other methods of solicitation. Among female sex workers in Andhra Pradesh found 41% reported non-use of condom. The researchers hypothesized that the high-risk behavior may be related to the sex work setting and not the way of soliciting clients.

A study in Karnataka found that girls working in beauty parlors who were involved in sex work used phone solicitations but when interviewed claimed to have control over condom-use. These parlor based sex workers reported that their clients are educated with well-paid occupations and often they preferred not to indulge in high risk behavior of not using a condom. This gives an impression that literacy level may be related to greater awareness about sexually transmitted diseases. Yet a study among 450 undergraduate students aged 18 – 20 years found that 27% of the participants used condoms sometimes and 10% never used condoms. This shows that more educational campaigns are needed to reach the general population. Although much has been done, it still remains a challenge as India is multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, most populous country in the world. It also seems sex workers like the parlor girls who have another source of income were in more power equal interactions as compared to those who did not have another source of income. The second source of income probably empowers them to take more assertive steps in protecting themselves. This trend is reflected among established sex workers. In comparison to a new sex worker, established sex workers are more likely to turn down an offer (of more money for unprotected sex) and have more control over the number of clients. It shows that less the power inequalities...
between the sex worker and client, the better their negotiating skills regarding condom use.

Regardless of the sex worker-related factors like financial instability (for engaging in high risk behaviors); the client plays an important role in the decision regarding condom use. Condom use, although key to HIV prevention relies on cooperation. This is a huge drawback in commercial sex. Obtaining 100% cooperation in an environment where there are power inequalities seems irrational and studies regularly report these irregularities with regard to condom use regardless of form of solicitations. Power inequalities have to be addressed to prevent the spread of HIV among sex workers and the population in general. 3, 5, 6, 8-10

Targeting sex workers using mobile phone solicitations is challenging for health service providers. 3, 4 & 10 On an average it can take nearly a year to get in touch with a new female sex worker and this time lag has serious health implications as the risk of acquiring HIV is highest in the first year (of starting sex work). 10 Since the Supreme Court of India ruling in 2013 which criminalizes homosexuality 14, it is highly possible this time lag could be even longer in case of the male or transgender sex workers using mobile phone solicitations. There has been a significant reduction in the burden of HIV in India, with 57% overall reduction in the annual new HIV infections among the adult population. 15 However, it seems regardless of the mode of solicitation or place of sex work, the complex area of power inequalities still needs to be addressed to control the spread of HIV in India. The first step would be having laws that empower.

References


Source of Support: Nil. Conflict of Interest: None.