

Street children's vulnerability to HIV and sexually transmitted infections in Malawian cities

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Abstract

Background: Street children have largely been ignored in the fight against HIV and AIDS. While some initiatives exist, the nature of street life, probably has not allowed viable interventions to be implemented. However, this is a group of people that could qualify as a "most at risk" group. This study set out to explore street children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe in Malawi.

Objective

The objective for this study was to explore street children's vulnerability to HIV and STIs infection.

Design

This qualitative study employed In-depth interviews with street children in the two main cities of Malawi. A total of 23 street children were interviewed.

Results

The study strongly suggests that street children could be vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. This is due to various factors which include low knowledge levels of STI and HIV, high risk sexual practices, lack of safer place to spend their nights for both boys and girls rendering them vulnerable to sexual abuses and the use of sex as a tool to secure protection and to be accepted especially for the newcomers on the street.

Conclusions

This study highlights street children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation which predisposes them to risk of HIV and AIDS as well as Sexually Transmitted infections. Furthermore, the street environment offers no protection against such vulnerability. There is need to explore potential and context sensitive strategies that could be used to protect street children from sexual exploitation and HIV and AIDS infection.

Background

It is estimated that up to 150 million children worldwide live on the streets of urban areas. Preliminary studies indicate that the prevalence of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among these children greatly exceed that of general children's population.¹ In Malawi, the number of children growing up on the streets of urban areas is rising as a result of worsening economic conditions aggravated by the breakdown of extended family structures and the impact of HIV and AIDS pandemic. An estimated 25% of urban population is infected with the HIV virus. There is an estimated 1.2 million orphaned by AIDS of which 0.4% is estimated to be street children with another 0.1% as potential street children. Thus, about 80 percent of the street children in Malawi are orphaned by HIV and AIDS,² and estimates in Malawi suggest that about 8,000 children or more live in the streets of Malawi's major cities.³

Street children who make the street their home and a source of livelihood are inadequately protected or supervised by a responsible adult,⁴ thus they might be children not necessarily homeless or without families, but are living in situations where there is no protection from responsible adults. Being a street child means going hungry, sleeping in insalubrious places, facing up to violence and sometimes becoming an expiatory

victim. It means growing up without companionship, love and protection, having no access to education or medical services, losing all dignity and becoming an adult before even having been a child. Street children are therefore prone to physical, social and emotional hazards.

The majority of street children are living in conditions of severe deprivation, which place them at all kinds of health risks. Among the most serious threats to health of street children is the high degree of exposure to sexual abuse. Rape, prostitution, sexual bartering and exchange, casual sex and romantic sexual relationships are among the factors that increase their risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections. These factors, in addition to early exposure to both heterosexual and homosexual behaviours place them at risk of STIs.^{5,6,7} Girls face an added risk of becoming pregnant and some proceed to deliver their infants and undergo the associated problems of early childbearing and motherhood, and the cycle of poverty and street life continues.⁸

The increasing number of street children is one of the most serious urban social problems facing Malawi today. In response to this, few institutions and associations have been established in Malawi in order to provide support to these vulnerable children. Currently these institutions and associations have been established in Lilongwe, Blantyre and Mzuzu. Despite the provision of such support, these institutions have never come forward to mitigate the exposure of street children to sexual exploitation so as to reduce their risk to STIs.

Globally, street children's behaviours include activities known to be high risk for contracting STIs. Several studies that exist on the sexual behaviors of street children show that these children engage in behaviors that put them at risk of sexually transmitted infections.⁹⁻¹² Literature from these studies strongly suggests that street children are at a greater risk of STIs compared to other children. There is existing evidence that these children engage in sexual activity either in exchange for money or seeking protection and sometimes either by being forced.¹³ One of the similar studies by Sharma,¹⁴ depicts that street children both at pre-puberty and puberty indulge in unsafe sexual activity not only with the opposite sex but also with the same sex and mostly elder boys forcibly indulge in anal sex with the younger boys. Similar studies,^{15,16} also support that street children, (boys mainly) prefer homosexual relations and practice anal sex with fellow boys as boys are easily available. It was however suggested by the researchers issue that street children are a high risk group to STIs, and that introducing risk reduction programmes to their vulnerability would be of great importance.

The incidence of sexual abuse in form of homosexual and bisexual practice on the street is considered to be high.¹⁷ These practices might be amenable to brief cultural interventions and that the provision of night shelters to the homeless children can be a potential benefit to reduce the risk of sexual abuse and other risk sexual behaviors.¹⁰ It has also been supported and suggested that environmental structural interventions may help to reduce the burden of STIs among street children in urban setting.²²

Studies done in various countries,¹⁸⁻²² strongly suggests that majority of street children are sexually active and there are

quite a number of high risk behaviors making them prone to STIs. The children involve themselves in survival sex such as exchanging sex with basic needs and as a means of seeking comfort and protection. In Canada it was also found that unprotected sex, intravenous drug use, prostitution and incarceration were among the factors that put street children at risk of STIs.²³ A similar study,¹⁶ showed that street children are not in full control of their sexual lives and constant sexual exposure leaves them vulnerable to STIs. This study was therefore conducted in order to establish whether the street children in Malawi are vulnerable to STI and HIV infection based on their own experiences and views.

Methods

The study was conducted in the cities of Lilongwe and Blantyre urban streets through Tikondane children's centre (Lilongwe) and Chisomo Children's club (Blantyre) respectively during August – October in 2009. These two children's clubs linked the researchers to the subjects (street children) for interviews as these centers offer some other services including the provision of support and basic needs to children found on the street of these cities. Convenient sampling was used to identify street children in both cities who were willing to participate in the study. 23 street children (15 from Blantyre and 8 from Lilongwe) were recruited in the study)

Data collection was through in depth interviews. The participants were interviewed on a one to one basis and a digital recorder was used to record the interviews. All interviews were conducted in vernacular – Chichewa. Data obtained from the study was analyzed manually using content analysis and presented in qualitative form. Written and verbal consent for participation was obtained. All respondents are anonymous in the text for protection as well as to safeguard their dignity.

Results

Street children expressed experiencing sexual exploitation and view themselves as vulnerable to sexual exploitation that could predispose them to the risk of HIV and AIDS as well as other Sexually Transmitted infections. Furthermore, the street environment offers no protection against such vulnerability. The common facilitating factors that emerged from the study included low level of knowledge, high risk sexual practices and a sexual exploitation facilitating environment.

Street Children's Knowledge and Exposure to STIs

Among the issues this study aimed at exploring was to assess street children's knowledge of STIs. Interviews revealed that only a few street children indicated to have heard of sexually transmitted infections. Regarding the source of such information, the respondents mentioned a local Children's club, primary schools previously attended and also from friends on the streets. The few respondents that recited knowledge of STIs, mentioned gonorrhoea ("chzonono") and Syphilis ("chindoko") as the common STIs prevalent among the street children. Regarding modes of transmission and prevention, the few respondents correctly mentioned sexual contact as the major mode of transmission.

The study also aimed at establishing the perception of the street children regarding as to who was at risk of the sexually transmitted infections. Interviews established that majority of the street children interviewed considered themselves not at risk of STIs. However, the respondents indicated that those at risk of STIs were those that indulged in sexual

relations with older people.

"Young people are the ones who are at risk for the STIs because they like indulging themselves in sexual relations with older men, and mostly, wherever they are, they dream about having sex".

"Men are the ones at risk because they tend to propose more girls and women".

The study also aimed at exploring the extent of STI exposure (infections) among the children interviewed. The results indicate that few respondents were able to confirm that they have ever contracted an STI. The reason for this was lack of knowledge of the symptoms of STIs by the majority of the street children. Of the 23 children interviewed only 2 admitted to have picked an STI. These results also correlate with the low levels of knowledge of the STI symptoms among the street children interviewed. The few children that confirmed to have contracted an STI came to know of the situation through a friend and a guardian (grandmother).

"I was once told by my friend that he was discharging pus from his genitals, when I asked him what was the matter, he said he was lured by peers to have sex with a strange girl sometime back. . Since then I don't know his whereabouts"

"I have ever suffered from an STI but I didn't know where to go as such I went to my grandmother who helped me with concoctions of herbs to drink."

Risk Sexual Behaviors

Among the main issues the study aimed at exploring was to establish whether risk sexual behaviors exist among street children that may predispose them at risk of contracting HIV and other STIs.

All participants interviewed indicated high risk sexual behaviours take place among the street children every day. The main contributing factor as cited by the participants was lack of safer places to spend nights especially those children that are permanently on the streets. This was because both boys and girls used the same sleeping quarters. Interviews revealed that boy/girl sexual relationship was rampant among the street children. It was also established that the core business in these relationships was sexual intercourse. Some participants indicated that where there were no girls, boys indulge in sexual activities with fellow boys; mostly the bigger boys would prey on the smaller boys or those boys that are new on the streets.

"We sleep in video show rooms, alongside the shops, bus depots and sometimes we even sleep together with girls"

The study also revealed that new arrivals on the streets especially girls are used as sex objects by older boys as well as the watchmen that are guarding shops at night. Mostly, such sexual relationships are for protection to the newcomers. In the case of those newcomers that refuse such sexual advances, they are beaten up and chased away from that particular area of the street. Interviews also revealed that a girl may be having these sexual relationships with several boys. This situation enables such girls to sustain their daily food

rations since the boys appease these girls with food. It was also established that watchmen guarding the shops were also the worst perpetrators for these high risk sexual behaviours on the streets. Most times the watchmen provide food to the girls in exchange for sexual favours. Some participants also indicated that older boys also indulge in sexual relationships with commercial sex workers. Late in the night commercial sex workers would ask the older boys to escort them to their homes in exchange for sexual favours and some food.

"Watchmen/Guards offer us food and a place to sleep; when we sleep they advise us to take off our clothes so that we shouldn't feel hot. Then they advise us to face the other side so as to keep away our bad smell in so doing they indulge in "anal sex" with us"

Facilitating Environment

Lack of safer places to spend the night especially for those children that are permanently on the streets predisposes the street children to sexual behaviours that put them at risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. This situation facilitates the sharing of sleeping quarters between boys and girls.

At night the street becomes a 'heaven' of all sorts' of characters that include thugs, drunkards, prostitutes (both male and female), security guards and other villains. This concoction of characters brews an enabling environment that is conducive to sexual exploitation to the street children. The street becomes very unsafe to the point that street children would do anything just to survive. Some of the survival initiatives on the street by street children include sexual favours to the dominant 'scavengers' in exchange for protection, food, shelter and other favours that would facilitate the life of the street child on the street bearable.

Discussion

Street life exposes children to various physical and psychosocial hazards. Poor socialization due to absence of a responsible adult in their early life, a factor that sends them to the street is the basic factor for this vulnerability. While on the street, the children's low level of knowledge about STIs and AIDS further predispose them to high risk sexual practices. In this study children who were aware of STIs did not have adequate knowledge more especially on the mode of transmission and prevention for them to take appropriate steps to protect themselves. These findings present a picture similar to other studies,²⁴⁻²⁶ which concurred that street children have a significant lower level of accurate information on HIV and AIDS and other STIs especially on the mode of transmission and measures of prevention. It is clear that disease transmission is directly related to lack of knowledge on the mode of transmission and prevention as well as those children with little knowledge on a certain disease are more likely to contract the disease than those with adequate and correct information.

While awareness could facilitate propensity to prevention, the environment in which the children find themselves renders any attempts to do so ineffective as the children largely cannot control their sexuality in the sense that they are either forced to have sex or it becomes a means for their survival. New children on the street have to offer sexual favours to older boys who in a way "own" the street for them to be protected to various problems they can face especially

those inflicted by fellow street children. Street environment offer no protection to street children from sexual abuse as there no safe sleeping quarters. The study established that lack of night shelters on the street provides an enabling environment for prostitutes and night guards/watchmen to forcibly engage in unprotected sexual activities with the street children.

Majority of the street children do not consider themselves at risk of STIs and AIDS. This is the case in spite of the high risk sexual practices the street children engage in. The implication of this observation is that spread of STIs among the street children is accelerated by the prevailing predisposing factors which include insufficient knowledge on STIs, as well as their mode of transmission and prevention strategies.

Given the prevailing interviews with street children on sexual health, the number of those children that admitted to have picked an STI was very low. However, these results correlate with the low level of knowledge of the STI symptoms among the street children interviewed. These findings concurred with other studies,^{24,28} that confirmed that street children have a significant lower level of accurate knowledge on STIs in general especially on issues pertaining to transmission and measures of prevention.

Of particular concern is the fact that the children engage in anal sex, which is itself is a high risk sexual act. With anal sex, the children would need more "specialised" knowledge and lubricants to protect themselves. Older street boys forcibly indulge in anal sex with young boys because boys are easily accessible than girls on the street. The majority of the street children indulge in sexual activities without using condoms as a means of protection, as such protection from STIs is non-existent. Unsafe sexual activity not only with the opposite sex but also with the same sex is acknowledged and proven to be the main route for HIV infection and other STIs transmission. These findings concur with studies by other researchers,^{15,16} who confirm that street children prefer homosexual relations and practice anal sex with fellow boys since boys are more available than girls. The study also established that "survival sex" is practiced by the majority of the street children. In this context survival sex essentially implies indulging in prostitution in order to earn money, find food and seek protection. Surviving on the street entails giving higher priority to obtaining food, clothing, protection and other basic needs. The street children are not concerned about health or safe sex practices. These findings presented a similar picture to similar studies,¹⁸⁻²² that concluded that street children involve themselves in survival sex such as exchanging sex with basic needs and as a means of seeking comfort and protection. The implication of this is that, as long as the need of survival sex is not altered, street children will continue to be vulnerable to HIV and other STIs in Malawian cities.

Conclusion

The study has established a number of aspects in relation to street children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. It confirmed that street children are a vulnerable group of young people whose lifestyles and exposure to street environments place them at risk of HIV infection and other STIs. Rape, anal sex, unprotected sex with the opposite sex and survival sex were among the factors increasing their vulnerability. Street environments offer no protection to street children from sexual abuse as there are no safe sleeping quarters. Lack of night shelters on the street, offers an added advantage for prostitutes and watchmen/guards to forcibly engage in

unprotected sexual intercourse with these children. Children are less likely to be exploited when they are off the street and safely protected in the night shelters. Rape is an avenue for STIs transmission and spread to others as sexually exploited children rarely seek medical treatment.

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