

Contextual influences on condom use among men who have sex with men (MSM) in India

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Presented at the XVII International AIDS Conference, Mexico, August 3-8, 2008

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVE

- Quantitative studies among MSM in India have shown high levels of unprotected anal sex. However, there is little information about in what contexts MSM could not use condoms.
- Such information will assist in designing HIV prevention programs to remove barriers to consistent condom use.
- In a larger study on sexual networks of MSM, we explored the contexts in which MSM did not use condoms.

METHODS

- The findings presented here are part of a larger qualitative study was conducted in 5 Indian states (Maharashtra, Gujarat, WestBengal, Orissa, and Delhi).
- Ninety-two in-depth interviews (IDI) and 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted among MSM (Kothis, 'Doubles', Gays), along with 16 key-informant interviews.
- FGD and IDI Participants were recruited using purposive sampling.
- Data were analysed with a narrative thematic approach using grounded theory techniques.

RESULTS-1: PERSONAL-LEVEL BARRIERS

a. Perceived reduction in sexual pleasure

- *“If I wear a condom and have sex then I don’t feel like I have had sex. If sex is without it [condoms] then I feel good. Till the sex is not over that feeling [pleasure] should remain.”*

b. Lack of knowledge about condom (especially in rural settings)

- Though all participants did know about condoms, some reported that some years ago they were not aware about the need to use condoms during sex with males.
- As a MSM whose native is a small town said: *“No. I did not use condoms at that time [before some years]. Because I did not have any information [about condoms and HIV risk].”*

RESULTS-2: INTER-PERSONAL BARRIERS

1. Contexts of unprotected sex with male regular partner

a. No specific reason

“I used oil [only] when we have [anal] sex. Never used condoms in the 4 years [of relationship].” Not feeling the need to use condom was the reason given by that person. He could not think of any reason since he never seriously thought about that.

b. Both (Self and partner) dislike using condoms

”No. I don’t use [condoms with regular partner] because we don’t like it at all.”

c. Intimacy and love

A MSM told that 'closeness' with his ex-regular male partner prevented him from using condoms with him.

“Mostly he used to [insert] me, I used to be less in that and he used to fight with me...No. we did not use condoms. We were very close.” Similar reasoning was given by another MSM: “I have not used condoms [with regular partner]. He is my personal man [means close friend]. We have body sex, oral sex, and anal sex.”

d. Trust

- *“No [condoms] - because ...I trust him that he never goes out [have sex] with anybody else.”*

e. 'Negotiated safety'

A 29-year old unmarried MSM explained why he does not use condoms with his steady partner.

“We have tested our HIV status and both of us are negative. Only because of that we do not use condoms when we have sex with each other.”

Thus, though they have unprotected sex, if both are HIV-negative, then it could actually be considered as 'safer sex' in the context of HIV acquisition. But non-adherence to 'negotiated safety' agreement and nondisclosure of breaking the agreement can pose risk to both.

2. Contexts of unprotected sex with male clients

Some MSM and Hijras who engage in sex work reported several incidents of unprotected sex with their male clients.

a. Not enough condoms but too many clients

For some MSM who engage in sex work, the high number of male clients in a day means that they do not have condoms for all encounters. “Sometimes we have safer sex, sometimes the condom tears, and at times the customers are so many that we are not left with any condoms to use. Then we have sex without condoms.”

b. More money offered - No condoms

A MSM reported that he knew of an unmarried MSM in his 40s who pays his friends to have sex with him but he never uses condoms.

This participant said, “I gave him advice lots of time but he does not understand. He said that he is old now and it is okay [even if he gets any infection].” Thus, that person was not worried about getting HIV or [STIs] since according to him he is already aged and thus it does not make any difference to him. According to this participant, his friends had unprotected sex with that old person because of money.”

3. Contexts of unprotected sex with 'known' male partners

a. No condoms in group sex with known persons

“There is a friend’s place where every Saturday and Sunday, we gather and we all remove our clothes and have sex ... No, no condoms.”

b. Could not control sexual urge and could not think about condoms

“There is a person I know whom I like ... and I have had sex with him many times. I get aroused very fast when I see him and most of the times I have [inserted] him. I used to love [inserting] him....” He said that he never used condoms with that person.

c. Casual visits by friends end up in sex - hence no condoms

A gay-identified MSM said that he invited his friends once in a while to his home and sometimes sex happens without condoms: “It is like that they come to visit me and we end up having sex. We don’t use condoms then.”

4. Contexts of unprotected sex with casual male partners

a. Not carrying condoms

“I don’t carry condoms with me but if the other person has condoms then I won’t deny using it. But I know that others also don’t carry condoms with them so then most of the time we have sex without condoms.”

b. Multiple encounters and Focus on pleasure preclude condom use

Talking about the use of condoms among MSM, a Kothi-identified MSM said:

“Generally, Kothis and Panthis have sex in public places and some times it becomes difficult to search condom and to wear it on penis. There are some people who have sex for six to eight times [in a day] and it becomes tedious to use condom each time. For some [MSM] sex is more important than safety.”

c. Partner is 'good-looking'

“[‘Good’] means decent, one who looks handsome and one who behaves well to me too. One who...has no boils or lesions on his male organ, then I don’t mind having unsafe sex also.”

Also, some do not want to lose the opportunity to have sex with a good-looking person and did not use condoms.

d. Difficult to control sexual urge (and also no access to condoms)

A MSM acknowledged that while he goes out to cruising sites where there is no access to condoms, the sexual urge makes it difficult to think about buying and using condoms. “...if I go out to [cruising sites] I don’t use condoms. When we have sexual urge it’s very difficult to control – if I don’t have condoms - I do it without condoms.”

e. Difficult to get or maintain erection – if condom is used

A MSM explained that for him it is difficult to get or maintain erection which prevents him from using condoms. “Just think that you are about to [insert] someone and your dick becomes stiff - at that time would you really get the packet and then open it and put on the condom? By that time, the sex is gone... [Hence] it is better to get infected by any disease rather than using condom.”

f. Belief that since already HIV-positive - nothing more to lose

When asked about the reason for not using condoms, a HIV-positive MSM replied: “Because I already have HIV.” Thus, ignorance about the need to protect one’s health by having safer sex means this person is posing health risks not only to others but also to himself.

RESULTS-3: STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

1. *Forced sex by policemen – No condoms*

Many Kothi-identified MSM reported having heard of or personally been sexually abused by policemen. In some areas, it has become such a routine matter that they consider sexual abuse by policemen as part of their life.

As a Kothi-identified MSM said, “I remember one incident where a Kothi was caught by police from [place]... took him into police van and forced him to have anal sex. They did not use condom. Every Kothi [in that area] came to know about this incident. How can a Kothi tell police to use condom?”

Key informants and FGD participants stated that the presence of Indian Penal Code Section-377, which criminalizes same-sex behavior, is misused by police not only to extort money from MSM but also to sexually assault feminine MSM.

2. Forced sex by ruffians – No condoms

Many MSM, especially Kothi-identified, reported several incidents of forced sex. Talking about his experience of forced sex, in a FGD, a Kothi-identified MSM said, “Once a person took me from [train] junction on his bike under [a bridge] and two other people came. By showing me a knife forcefully they had sex with me...without condoms.”

Loss of faith in the law enforcement agency and the presence of the criminal law which does not differentiate between consensual and non-consensual same-sex behavior means many MSM continue to face sexual assaults and possible risk of HIV transmission or acquisition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- MSM faces several levels of barriers in consistently using condoms and thus HIV prevention programs should address the various contexts that lead to unprotected sex.
- Need to move beyond individual-focused interventions and remove barriers to consistent condom use at multiple (personal, interpersonal and structural) levels.