

Sex workers in Nairobi: Services users at BHESP

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Abstract

This baseline pilot study was the joint work of the University of Leicester and Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme. Bar Hostess Empowerment & Support Programme (BHESP) is an organisation for and by sex workers (known as bar hostesses) in Nairobi, Kenya. The project consisted of experts in public health, human rights interventions and the sociology of sex work, who came together to develop and administer a unique research activity. The study further provided BHESP with baseline information on the various services provided and the gaps at the clinic, as well as barriers that young female sex workers face in returning to formal education, and /or pursuing their careers.

Keywords: bar hostesses; public health; human rights; intervention; sex work; education; business; training; Kenya

1.1 Rationale

A 2016 audit (BHESP, 2016) found that over 20,000 registered bars across the city and surrounding areas of Nairobi each employed around 4 bar hostesses. Many of these are young female sex workers with very limited formal education, skills or training. Life for these youths and young people can be extremely difficult. Individuals selling sex in Nairobi and Kenya more widely, still disproportionately suffer from different forms of personal, professional and state violence, and are among the most marginalized communities in the country (Cesnulyte, 2017).

The pilot project (reported here) aimed to directly support the challenges identified above in the following ways:

- i).* Provide baseline demographic information of a sample of the 20,000 sex workers currently under the BHESP outreach programme
- ii).* Establish the issues for young women in the sex industry to leave; re-train; return to school; enter the mainstream job market or other informal economy work
- iii).* With NGOs, raise awareness of the need to address economic empowerment, finance initiatives and entrepreneurial activities as well as essential HIV/health interventions.

- iv*). Develop a substantial GCRF bid to provide routes to alternative sources of income. This project directly addresses this development challenge by co-creating new models of trajectories for young women. The skills programmes will include:
- a) Digital skills for safety, advocacy and health
 - b) Vocational skills for future employment (hairdressing; driving; hotel work)
 - c) Computer literacy skills for administrative work

1.2 Research questions

The main research questions were:

- a) What are the socio-demographics of Young Female Sex workers?
- b) What are the service needs of sex workers using BHESP facilities?
- c) What types of skills are needed by YFSW to move into popular jobs such as hotel work, catering, driving, hairdressing or other informal economies?
- d) How can the skills identified be provided to the YFSW?
- e) What are the barriers of returning to education or formal training for YFSW?

1.3 Methods

The project was led by a participatory action research methodology, whereby sex workers were trained as co-researchers to deliver the project. Sex workers were employed as researchers and were involved in developing the survey, piloting it amongst themselves, designing the recruitment strategies and delivering the research. The survey results were discussed with the five co-researchers who inputted into the analysis and interpretation of the findings. To achieve the study objectives, quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. The two approaches were combined to help overcome the deficiencies or biases that may result from employing one method and validating the main method applied. The main methods for this baseline were a survey research and three focus group discussions, conducted between May and August 2018. The survey gathered data from 502 sex workers on socio-demographic data, their level of education and training as well as what they consider as the popular jobs/what skills they would like to acquire. Three focus group discussions took place and brought together twenty-two young female sex

workers who provided data on the main challenges, the barriers to returning to education or formal training as well as the groups view on what is perceived as popular skills and jobs.

1.4 Key findings

The socio- demographics of sex workers in this study indicate that the majority of sex workers are young - 33% of the sample were aged 18-24; 52% aged 25-34. Responsibilities for family members was high, with a dependency burden from their own children (78% had children), their extended family or both. This is further shown by the marital status of the respondents with more than 40% being single and never married as well as low levels of education, with only 33% having completed secondary education. These findings are broadly similar to those carried out by Gathigi (1993) in terms of the demographic characteristics of sex workers.

The personal network size of the sex workers presented in this study further presents BHESP with data to infuse into their programming and reach out to other sex workers and vulnerable minors engaging in transactional sex. This is a key area for further research using social network analysis. While the estimates of number of sex workers known to the respondents is in no way a census, they give an indication of the numbers and service users near BHESP clinics, and potential beneficiaries of a skills based programme. This network of peers is also data that can be built on in future research and programme work in accessing respondents.

For young female sex workers, the burden of providing for dependents is a key finding in this study. This is mainly because the majority of respondents reported having an average of three dependents as well as a lack of adequate finances to cater for them. These demographic characteristics could be cited as drivers, and provide compelling reason to engage with and stay in sex work for the respondents. These findings are significant for BHESP work in providing the traditional health services and in developing innovative ways to bridge the gap and other needs of their service users. This study finds economic empowerment and skills development of young female sex workers are a priority for BHESP and other partners in their future work and programing.

Most of the young women interviewed initially connected with clients in Bars and clubs (98%), with others similarly indicating hotels and guest houses. Most of the respondents further cited working in Bars and clubs as jobs they perform and /or avenues for future prospects in careers and income generation, both as employees or business

people in those spaces. This finding indicates the most frequented spaces by sex workers both as practitioners and workers in those spaces. It is important to note that whereas this study did not focus on drug abuse among sex workers, the findings allude to the need to focus on this, and the potential danger it poses to young female sex workers. This is further indicated by the large number of sex workers who identified selling alcohol is a type of work they engage in (79%). It is, however, important to note that only 3% identified drug abuse and alcohol as a barrier that hindered them to return to formal education. The interaction with alcohol by young female sex workers at an early age can also be further probed.

An interesting finding in this study is the number of respondents who identified internet use and connection with clients, with 50% citing online platforms and 80% on social media and mobile phones. Sanders et.al (2018) in their book *Internet Sex work: Beyond the gaze* highlight the different forms of internet-based sex work. Although this has not been a focus of previous studies on sex workers in Kenya, it provides insights on the developing types of sex work and the diverse online platforms that the young female sex workers in Kenya use. This finding is significant as it yields questions for further investigation on the use of online spaces for sex work in Kenya, as well as opportunities for skills on online safety and other programmes suitable for sex workers.

The respondents of this survey were drawn from the pool of service users at BHESP. Services they sought were of interest to this study. Majority (90%) of the respondents cited clinical services and VCT counselling as the services they sought most. This finding is not surprising given the huge focus of BHESP work on health intervention. There is, however, need to focus on economic programmes to go hand in hand with the health interventions. ILO (2005) indicate a strong directional linkage between HIV/AIDS and poverty in resource poor settings. HIV/AIDS is seen as a manifestation of poverty conditions that exist, and as a result of the impact of the epidemic on social and economic conditions.

The service users at BHESP further identified the skills they needed to move into popular jobs, such as; catering, driving, hairdressing and other skills to start businesses in informal economies. When asked what career paths they would eventually like to pursue, the following answers were given:

Continue with formal education - 25%

Start a Business – 57%

Pursue a technical course/vocational training - 9%

Based on their preferred career paths, this study found that a skills based programme tailored to suit the needs of the beneficiaries would best address their needs. Crosscutting programmes, for example; computer skills, safety and security, self-esteem and self-care, are also important considerations.

Income generating interventions, including vocational skills training, are effective ways in which to address structural factors associated with HIV and poverty reduction, particularly amongst the female population (Kennedy et al 2014). There is also strong evidence from vocational skills training with sex workers in low/middle income nations that such interventions can begin to offer alternative opportunities to selling sex, as well as bring HIV and health prevention benefits and significant outcomes outside the health remit.

The findings in this study further support research on a skills based programme targeting the specific needs of young female sex workers. The data from the programme will build on the 'what works' evaluation literature that has gone before, bringing together successes from vocational skills training and peer based interventions with sex workers. This will further build on the theoretical work of Sanders (2007), who developed a model of trajectories out of sex work.

1.5 Conclusions

This baseline study provides data for BHESP as service providers at the clinics and as key partners working with young women. It also yields initial data for a skills programme for young female sex workers. There is need for an economic empowerment programme among the young female sex workers and BHESP service users. Programming for key population has traditionally focused on health interventions and emphasis needs to be placed on the role of skills in increasing incomes for sex workers. This will, in turn, broaden their sources of income, make them safer as well as gain more from sex work and other types of work. In terms of programming at BHESP and her partners skills based programme, focusing on the needs of the young women is timely. With the survey findings on dependency and barriers to alternative education and career options, a skills based programme with a well thought

out plan on sustainability is proposed. Cross cutting skills based programmes and trainings for young female sex workers should also be weaved into existing programmes targeting them.

In order to ensure an effective and efficient skills based programme, a mapping of existing programmes targeting young people on vocational and skills developed should be done. This will ensure the new project builds on already existing work and leverages on the lessons from those programmes. This baseline survey is expected to help in establishing and enhancing strategic international research partnerships: initial relationships are strong with the Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support programme, but this initiative would enable links to be made in the region with their allies.

This project and area of development is an example of the importance of using expertise and skills across disciplines to create projects with participants and NGO partners than have a direct linkage into the business strategies and service development of the NGO. Working across core subject of health (public and HIV prevention); with knowledge of working around gender based human rights issues and broader knowledge of the sex industry made the input into this project unique and diverse. Notably the centrality of having the NGO and the participants at the centre of the project as a core aim for all of the facilitators enabled this initial cross-disciplinary international project to work effectively over a 6 month period.

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