

## Female Sex Workers and Their Association with Self-Help Groups in Thane, Maharashtra, India: A Comparative Analysis in the Context of HIV Program Outcome

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**Abstract :** Objectives: HIV interventions in India has leveraged Self-Help Group (SHG) as one of the key strategies under structural intervention to empower female sex workers (FSW) to reduce their risk exposure and vulnerability to STI/HIV. Understanding the role of SHGs in light of the evolving dynamics of sex work needs to be delved into to strategize HIV interventions among FSWs in India. This paper aims to study the HIV program outcome among the FSWs associated with SHGs and FSWs not associated with SHGs in Thane, Maharashtra. Study Design: This cross-sectional study, was undertaken from the Behavioral Tracking Survey (BTS) conducted among 503 FSWs in Thane in 2015. Two-stage probability based conventional sampling was done for selection of brothel and bar based FSWs, while Time Location Cluster (TLC) sampling was done for home, lodge and street-based sex workers. Methods: Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression were performed to compare and contrast between FSWs associated with SHG and those not associated with SHG with respect to the utilization of HIV related services by them. 'Condom use', 'consistent condom use', 'contact with peer-educators', 'counseling sessions' and 'HIV testing' were chosen as indicators on HIV service utilization. Results: 8% (38) of FSWs are registered with SHG; 92% aged  $\geq$  25 years, 47% illiterate, and 71% are currently married. The likelihood of utilizing HIV services including, knowledge on HIV/AIDS and its mode of transmission (OR:5.54; CI: 1.87-16.60;  $p < 0.05$ ), accessed drop-in Centre (OR: 6.53; CI: 2.15-19.88;  $p < 0.10$ ), heard about joint health camps (OR: 4.71; CI:2.12-10.46);  $p < 0.05$ ), negotiated or stood up against police/broker/local goonda/clients (OR: 2.26; CI: 1.08-4.73;  $p < 0.05$ ), turned away clients when they refused to use condom during sex (OR: 3.76; CI: 1.27-11.15;  $p < 0.05$ ) and heard of ART (OR; 4.55; CI: 2.18-9.48;  $p < 0.01$ ) were higher among FSWs associated with SHG in comparison to FSWs not associated with SHG. Conclusions: Considering the improved HIV program outcomes among FSWs associated with SHG; HIV interventions among FSWs could consider facilitating the formation of SHGs with FSWs as one of the key strategies to empower the community for ensuring better program outcomes.

**Keywords :** empowerment, female sex workers, HIV, Thane, self-help group

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