Reaching male and transgender sex worker communities in Pakistan: addressing public and private identities

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Objectives

Understand the context of male and transgender sex work and how daily life is negotiated around a stigmatised identity.

Background

Recent epidemiological data show the key importance of male and transgender sex workers as separate target groups for interventions in Pakistan's HIV epidemic[1-2]. Social norms surrounding sexuality, stigmatising attitudes towards sex workers, and illegality of both sex work and male to male sex considerably constrain the individual's ability to act and reduce risk.

Methods

Peer ethnography[3] was used, training 15 Transgender and 15 Male SWs to interview their peers on social life, risks and problems, and health. We use data from in-depth interviews with these peer interviewers, and observational data from training and analysis workshops. Findings are triangulated with results from a subsequent bio-behavioural survey among 800 male and transgender SWs, recruited through respondent-driven sampling.

A Hijra (*Khusra*) dancer entertains the men at a segregated wedding in the Pakistani Punjab (Dennis Drenner[4])

Results

1. One epidemiological but three sociological categories

Within the epidemiological category of biological males who sell sex, there are three sociologically different identities:

- ***Khusras*** are transgender (also known as hijra), they co-reside with other *khusras* within a hierarchical community led by gurus. *Khusra* cross-dress, are very visible in the society and accepted for their tradition of begging, as well as giving "blessings" and performing at weddings and on birth of a son
- ***Khotkis*** are feminised males, strongly networked around a common identity but mainly residing with their families. Less openly 'visible' in the society, the feminine mannerisms may give away they sell sex. Although distinct, *khotki* identity, social organisation and vulnerabilities overlap more closely with *khusra* than with the second group of MSW.
- ***Banthas*** have a male gender identity and are difficult to distinguish from other Pakistani men, with no need to organise around a stigmatised identity and sexuality. They often 'intercept' clients of *khusras* and *khotkis*.

2. Squashed between social and group norms: the fluidity of gender roles

Their sexual identity and life styles make khusras and khotkis vulnerable to violence and abuse from society, clients and police. However, the internal social networks among khusras and khotkis, with guru-chaila (master-disciple) and peer-based relationships serve as strong support structures.

While providing support this counter-society comes with distinct social norms which are based on expected 'feminine' behaviours in line with the shared identity. This includes norms that *khusras* do not get married, do not 'father' children and do not have penetrative sex with men nor women.

In reality some *khusras* do give in to family pressure to get married and have children. Strict normative responses were evident in group trainings and interviews among *khusras*, contrasting with more complex and fluid identities emerging in private in-depth interviews disclosing more 'traditional male' roles, desires and sexual practices. Sex with women is sanctioned among *khotkis* and marriage is seen as 'inevitable'. It is taken for granted and unproblematic among *banthas.*

3. Reported behaviour

The survey confirms different profiles for the three groups of SWs in terms of sex with women and reproduction (Table 1 and 2) as well as reported levels of penetrative sex with male clients (Table 3). Once controlled for the effect of age, khusras were 10 times less likely to be married (OR= 0.11, p<0.000) or have children (OR=0.14, p<0.000) compared to *banthas* (who did not significantly differ from *khotkis*). The qualitative research indicates we can safely suspect the estimates for *khusras* to be underestimates.

Table 1. Marriage and reproduction

	Bantha (N=193)	Khotki (N=361)	Khusra (N=251)
Currently married	18%	19%	10%
Has children	15%	16%	9%
Median age	*20*	*22*	*27*

Table 2. Total number of female partners in the last year

	Bantha (N=195)	Khotki (N=365)	Khusra (N=253)
none	44%	64%	88%
one	24%	23%	10%
two or more	32%	13%	2%

Table 3. Receptive and penetrative anal sex with male clients

	Bantha (N=186)	Khotki (N=336)	Khusra (N=204)
Receptive	93%	98%	99%
Penetrative	45%	13%	8%

Discussion

It is often assumed that *khusras* leave or are ejected from their families around puberty and that they join the *khusra* community for life. This was not the case for many of the khusras in our study as most of them went 'home' regularly, where they take on expected male gender roles as provider, son, husband and father.

Despite the social support derived from in-group networks, internal power relations increase dependence of individual members on gurus. Privately *khusra's* reliance on biological and pro-creational families for support in case of severe illness or old age remains important. Fear of rejection by the family dominated *khotkis*' discourse around identity and vulnerability.

Rigid group norms and structures add to wider societal norms in increasing vulnerability. It is clear that *khusras* and *khotkis* find themselves transgressing both social and group norms, with the risk of losing support and resulting in isolation from both communities.

Khusras visit the men's sections of the Abdullah Shah Ghazi shrine in Karachi (Dennis Drenner4).

Conclusions

Urgent scale-up of prevention efforts for diverse groups of male and transgender sex workers is needed. However, both identities and in-group structures may be more complex and diverse than publicly portrayed. When different interest groups start competing for funds and peer-led interventions are designed, the private complexities of daily life and internal power structures of networks need to be considered.

References

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