South Carolina Researchers Study Sex Trade and Vulnerability of HIV Infection Among Male Sex Workers in Zimbabwe

Research led by faculty in the South Carolina SmartState Center for Healthcare Quality and the Department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior in the University of South Carolina’s Arnold School of Public Health have completed a study examining sex trade and vulnerability of HIV infection among male sex workers who sell sex to men in Zimbabwe. The study was published in *AIDS Care* and led by assistant professor Shan Qiao and professor Xiaoming Li along with collaborators from the City University of Hong Kong, Beijing Institute of Technology, and South African Monitoring and Evaluation.

Male sex workers in Zimbabwe are a vulnerable sub-group at risk of violence, abuse, and HIV infection. In this qualitative study, the authors examined the practices of male sex workers and vulnerabilities to HIV infection based on interviews among 15 male sex workers in Bulawayo.

All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with the guidance of grounded theory. The transcripts were translated by the interviewer into English using NVivo 11.0 software for coding and analysis.

The male sex workers in this study reported diverse backgrounds in sexual orientation and life situations, plus a variety of work settings, income levels and access to clients. Due to the illegal nature of sex work and the stigma of homosexuality, practices in the sex trade were often hidden and subtle to avoid exposure to the police.

Some develop romantic relationships with regular clients, but more typically they suffered abuse, violence, and the threat of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Most Zimbabwean male sex workers were ill-informed and underestimated their vulnerability of HIV.

The researchers concluded that the stigmatization and criminalization of homosexuality in Zimbabwe creates an environment where it is difficult for male sex workers to protect themselves through consistent condom use and access to basic HIV prevention and care services.