Emotional Men and Pragmatic Women?: Relationship and gender dynamics between female sex workers and their regular partners in the Dominican Republic

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Background

• Condom use in the context of regular partnerships is low across the globe

• Male partners of female sex workers are traditionally viewed as holding power and decision-making authority regarding condom use

• This overly reductionist view fails to recognize the socio-economic context in which these relationships occur

• There is a need for innovative approaches to promote HIV prevention within these relationships
Setting: Dominican Republic

• Long history of HIV prevention work in the female sex industry and condom use high (>80%) with new clients

• HIV prevalence 1% overall, ranging from 3-8% among female sex workers

• Using an environmental-structural approach, consistent condom use with regular paying and non-paying increased significantly: 13.0% to 28.8%

• Consistent condom use, however, is still not the norm in regular partnerships among sex workers

• Women perceive that they are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection in their regular partnerships
Study Aim

• To explore relationship and gender dynamics between female sex workers and their regular male partners and consider their influence on HIV vulnerability, including patterns of socio-economic exchange to identify innovative and context-appropriate ways to promote HIV protective behaviors.
Methods: Sample and Recruitment

- Formative, qualitative study

- Regular partner defined as a trusted/intimate partner with whom the sex worker had sexual relations at least 4 times in last 3 months; at least 18 years of age

- Female sex workers recruited from ongoing cohort study

- Regular partners referred by sex workers in the cohort study

- Couples were not recruited into the study for ethical and safety reasons
Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

• In-depth interviews using a semi-structured guide (n=40)

• Interviews were conducted in Spanish by trained Dominican interviewers

• Data analysis began with narrative summaries to capture the “story” of the relationship between sex worker and

• Thematic coding around key areas of interest including socio-economic exchange, gender roles, communication, condom use
### Description of the Sample (n=40)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male regular partners (n=20)</th>
<th>Female sex workers (n=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean/range)</td>
<td>34 years (20-52)</td>
<td>30 years (19-41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Over 50% with some secondary</td>
<td>Over 50% only some primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives with regular partner</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a child(ren) with regular partner</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sex partners in last month (mean/range)</td>
<td>3 (1-15)</td>
<td>17 (1-60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of relationship with regular partner (mean/range)</td>
<td>6 years (5 months to 21 years)</td>
<td>6 years (3 months to 15 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses condoms consistently with regular partner</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tbody>
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Results: The Relationship “Story”

• Most couples met at a sex establishment or sex work area
  – Other ways that couples met included seeing each other in their neighborhoods and/or meeting through mutual friends/family

• Most regular partners paid the first time they had sex

• Regular partners and female sex workers felt unique attraction to each other – physical, sexual, emotional

• Condom use was the norm the first time but discontinued after a few encounters
  – Several couples had gone for HIV tests prior to stopping condom use
  – Most participants had other partners with varied levels of condom use
Results: Men Not Sole Providers

- While no longer paying directly for sex, all men provided some economic support to their regular FSW partner.

- However, men did not provide for all of women’s economic needs, mostly due to their limited economic resources.

- Women appreciated having economic independence to be able to buy what they needed.

- Men who could not support their partners were more tolerant of their involvement in sex work.

“If I pressure her [to get out of sex work], she will leave me. Because how am I going to be able to give her what she is able to get [through sex work]. Male regular partner.

“He doesn’t like it [sex work] but he has allowed it because he knows that his income is small and, in addition, he has two children to maintain”. Female sex worker.
Results: Women Supporting Men

• Women also provided economic support to male partners

• Economic support provided by women was generally in response to need rather than a regular or set amount

• The most frequent description of economic exchange between regular partners was “if I have money, I give it to him, if he has money he gives it to me”

There are days that I don’t have 100 or 200 pesos and I tell her to give me 200 pesos just to put gas in the motorcycle…”.  
Male regular partner

If I need money, she doesn’t think twice about getting it for me.  
Male regular partner
Many men conveyed a sense of emotional connection and pleasure in the time they spend with their regular partner.

“We will spend 5 days apart, and I miss her….I will even cook, make us dinner, we will sit just like you and I are sitting, and we will converse, talk about things.” Male regular partner

“I think Rosa is a great person. What I feel for her is passion. I mean, she is the mother of my children and we need to help each other out... In the good and the bad, if I give her [money] or not, she has been a great person, for this reason she means a lot to me.” Male regular partner
Results: Economics and Pragmatic Women

- Women’s narratives were more focused on their economic needs and concerns about their partners’ fidelity.

- Women who did not provide any economic support to their regular partners were generally younger and less emotionally attached to their partners.

- Some women conveyed a sense of entitlement to economic support in exchange for being a regular partner.

- These women did not necessarily desire a long-term commitment with their regular partners and actively cultivated economic opportunities with other partners.

If he feels bad and needs to vent, if he had a problem in his house and this problem happened on the 15th or 30th [of the month], I will listen to him. If not, I don’t listen to him. Ay no. I have too many of my own problems to be taking on his as well. Female sex worker

“I mean, I am not saying a set amount, but when he gets paid, of course he needs to give me my money, logically, because I have expenses and he knows I don’t work…The simple fact of being his girlfriend means he needs to cover my expenses, in my opinion…if he doesn’t give me money afterwards he can’t be asking me where I got money.” Female sex worker
Results: Adhering to Gender Roles

• In contrast, some women played a more traditional “wife” role

• These narratives include examples of emotional suffering, experiences of violence and abuse, and jealousy

• Many women in this type of dynamic lacked confianza in their partner but no longer used condoms due to the length of the relationship

“In the beginning he gave me [money] to go to the salon, like a wife. When he was in love…After, he got sour again because it wasn’t the same and he denied me even food and kept going out with [other] women. Female sex worker
Results: Being Treated Like a Man

• Men appreciated being treated “like a man” by their regular partner

• Men who adhered to a more traditional male partner role frequently maintained other sexual partnerships, were emotionally and/or physically abusive, and did not provide sufficient economic support

“She [regular FSW partner] treats you well, she washes your clothes when you need it, she cooks your food when you need it…even though she is a “cuero” (“prostitute”), you feel good.”

Male regular partner
Results: Communication Dynamics

• Condom use was discussed only at the beginning of the relationship in relation to HIV
  – A few couples got tested for HIV prior to stopping condom use

• Beyond condom use discussions in the beginning, men were uninformed about their partners’ family planning practices

• Many felt shame regarding their partner’s involvement in sex work and did not discuss it with her, facilitating ongoing stigma

• Both men and women described keeping secrets from their regular partners
  – Women “hid” the fact that they were still involved in sex work
  – Men “hid” the fact that they had other partners
Discussion

• Significant variation and nuances exist in the types of relationships and experiences of HIV-related vulnerability
  – Economic exchange is bidirectional and is negotiated in an ongoing manner
  – Men and women both challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles in the context of their regular partnerships

• Men received more emotional support than women from their regular partnerships

• Shame and stigma around sex work limits communication and limits supportive dynamics within regular partnerships
Implications for HIV Prevention

• Mutual provision of economic support and intimacy could provide an opportunity for condom negotiation

• Regular HIV testing by couples could be an effective alternative or complement to consistent condom use

• Interventions targeting couples should promote greater communication about sexual and reproductive health, including but not limited to HIV
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