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THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTION (STI) INFECTION RISK, PREVENTION, AND TESTING AMONG WOMEN COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS (WCSW) IN RAJSHAHI CITY OF BANGLADESH

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Background

The risk of Women Commercial Sex Workers (WCSWs) acquiring HIV and other STIs is significantly greater by engaging in unsafe sexual activity. Gonorrhoea and chlamydia are often found in third or more sex workers, trichomoniasis is common.

Aim/Methods

The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate barriers to WCSWs accessing, utilizing, and remaining in treatment and to document how the country handled the requirement of WCSWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted from July 2021 to December 2022) in Rajshahi, Bangladesh during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study involved: (1) a review of official orders/statements issued by the Government of Bangladesh (2) Face-to-face interviews with the 760 WCSWs aged 18-45; (3) Face-to-face interviews with 12 service providers; (4) Face-to-face and telephone interviews with 14 key informants; and (5) a one-day negotiation workshop with 30 participants representing both WCSWs and service provider.

Results

WCSWs mentioned that they had no access to healthcare facilities for more than 15 months during the COVID-19 Pandemic peak. The WCSWs received no test, or treatment No instructions or even minimum information were given to WCSWs with STIs, and attitudes to WCSWS were highly intolerant and hostile. Over 90 percent of the total sample reported having no test for STIs. When the health service facilities opened for other communicable diseases, STIs status (Gonorrhea) was reported by 54 percent of the sample, whereas 18 percent reported being positive for chlamydia and Trichomonas and 12.5 percent for hepatitis C. The service providers identified several specific practical barriers at the organizational level. The key informant interviews identified the country's incompetent healthcare systems such as poor governance and increased corruption in the health sector.

Conclusions

It is imperative that STI service providers and public health professionals be aware of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on STI care and prepared for potential increases in STI-related morbidity and mortality in the years to come. On the other hand, urgent interventions—including efforts to raise patient/provider awareness of COVID-19's effect on sexual health services and to reinstate routine STI screening, diagnosis and treatment