

Symptomatic Prevalence of STI and Treatment Seeking Behavior among males and females in selected districts of India

Despite programmatic interventions, risk behavior and risk environments persist and HIV/AIDS continues to spread among individuals, across national and regional borders. The explosive spread of HIV in areas where classic STD are epidemic (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa, Thailand) has encouraged a remarkable number of studies designed to examine the association between STD and HIV infections. The high incidence of STIs in India indicates the potential for rapid and extensive spread of the HIV epidemic. Early diagnosis and effective treatment of STD can significantly reduce the transmission of HIV. There has been increasing concern over the sexual and reproductive health and morbidity status of women and young women are especially at risk of contracting HIV because of the interplay of biological, economic and socio-cultural factors. Many epidemiologic and biologic studies now support the hypothesis that STDs enhance HIV transmission so it is necessary to detect the STIs at an early stage for proper treatment so that there is no possibility of having HIV infection.

A cross-cultural comparison of major correlates of young women's vulnerability to STIs/HIV focusing at extent of knowledge, prevalence, capacity building, improved services, support system and enabling environments and treatment seeking behavior of STIs among married and unmarried men and women was made in CHARCA (Coordinated HIV/AIDS Response through Capacity Building and Awareness) baseline survey. The survey has revealed an urgent need for developing approaches for early diagnosis and treatment of STIs as an important strategy to reduce the vulnerability of STIs/HIV among young women and men. This study provides comprehensive insights into the extent and correlates of gaps existing between the knowledge, availability and use of condom as HIV prevention as well as the associates and determinants for symptomatic prevalence of STIs, as potential risks towards acquiring HIV/AIDS among both married and unmarried young women and men of the study area. The present paper also explores the situation of treatment seeking behaviour and preferences among STI infected men and women.

The study is based on secondary data collected through the CHARCA baseline survey conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai in 2004 in selected five districts namely Aizwal, Bellary, Guntur, Kanpur and Kishanganj. Overall data for the present study pertain to information collected from 2458 married and unmarried women from the five districts in the age group of 13-24 year and 1309 married and unmarried males of 15-29 years age. A set of bivariate and multivariate techniques have been applied to meet the objectives of the paper.

Distribution of women by extent of their knowledge about STI transmission reveals that unmarried women are 1.3 times more likely to have knowledge about STI transmission than married women of age below twenty-five years. However, the difference in the knowledge about STI transmission between the married and unmarried women gets narrower while moving from partial to complete knowledge. It is also found that relatively higher proportion of unmarried women have reported at least one misconception (76%) than among married women (68%). Thus, those who are better informed about at least one mode of STI/HIV transmission are more likely to have at least one misconception of it. An analysis of association between condom use

and symptomatic prevalence of STIs reveals that the odds of any STI among unmarried women reveal that the women reporting condom use by their partner in the last sexual encounter are four times less likely to suffer with any STI during last twelve. It is surprising to know that a larger proportion of unmarried young women, who are not ready to accept husband's extramarital relationship, reported to suffer with any STI during last 12 months than their married counterparts.

Men act as active carriers to spread the sexually transmitted infections to their partners. The study found that though people are aware of condom and its availability and accessibility, overall use of condom in spite of knowing it as a means of preventing HIV is quite low among both married and unmarried men. A significantly higher proportion of unmarried men (43%) reported to suffer at least one of STI symptoms than among married men (35%). Moreover, the odds of experiencing any STI during last twelve months among respondents not perceiving condom as a protection against STI is 1.43 times higher than those perceiving as a protection against STI.

Treatment seeking behavior in case of STIs forms an important component in the over all STI management and also towards the significant curb of HIV/AIDS. Generally women with self reported symptoms of reproductive morbidity do not seek treatment due to existing taboos and inhibitions regarding sexual and reproductive health in society. Untreated STIs lead to increased risk of HIV infection and even if they seek treatment, majority of women seek health care from quacks or unqualified persons. The study reveals there is a significant variation between married and unmarried women towards type of utilizing the health facilities while younger women, both married and unmarried are more likely to utilize the private health care facilities as compared to their older age's counterparts.

Treatment seeking behavior in case of STIs among young men reveals that even in spite of higher reporting of any symptoms of STI in the last twelve month prior to survey a lower proportion of unmarried men are going for treatment. Married young men are 1.2 times more likely to go for treatment in case of STI than unmarried young men. Therefore, good quality of STI care is a prerequisite to attract the treatment seekers and hence likely to affect early diagnosis and treatment of STIs.

It has been argued in the studies, that an individual will not change his behavior until and unless he wants to change his behavior. Both the married and unmarried women and men are required to have correct knowledge about the modes of transmission, prevention, therefore, they should be well informed about the severity of the risk too. To grip the march of HIV there should be collective responsibility of Government, NGOs, media and individuals too to create an atmosphere for easy treatment seeking.