

PSYCHOSOCIAL REVIEW OF DRUG SUBSTANCE USE AMONG TRANSGENDER IN PENANG, MALAYSIA

Kumarashwaran Vadevelu^{*1}, Sulaiman Effendi², Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh³, Mohd Haizzan Yahaya³, R.B. Radin Firdaus⁴, Mohamad Shaharudin Samsurijan⁴ and Abdul Rais Abdul Latif⁵

¹*Social Work Programme, Faculty Humanities and Social Sciences,
Prince of Songkla University 90110, Thailand*

²*Section of Economic, University Muhammadiyah of
North Sumatra 20238, Indonesia*

³*Section of Social Work, School of Social Sciences,
University Sains Malaysia 11800, Malaysia*

⁴*Section of Development Planning & Management School of
Social Sciences, University Sains Malaysia 11800, Malaysia*

⁵*Section of Economics, School of Social Sciences,
University Sains Malaysia 11800, Malaysia*

^{*}*Corresponding Author: kumarashwaran@yahoo.com*

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Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted in Penang, Malaysia with the aim to analyze and gather in-depth understanding of challenges faced by transgender who used drugs. This study also aimed to understand some of the psychosocial support received by this marginal population in terms of overcoming their substance use behaviour. Eighteen respondents between the ages of 18 and 40 years were selected through the snowballing sampling technique due to the difficulty of getting the targeted respondents. The study found that all of the 18 respondents who participated in this study, only 4 respondents have used cannabis and methamphetamine ecstasy over a period of 12 months prior to the present study. The rest of the respondents in this study doesn't involved with drugs. This study suggests that both government

and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should continue to provide appropriate HIV and AIDS intervention among the transgender population. Social work intervention primarily in educating this marginal population towards the prevention of HIV transmission especially preventing from drugs substance uses which are associated with behaviours that facilitate HIV transmission in their daily life.

Keywords: Transgender; drug substance use; psychosocial review

Introduction

Previous research demonstrates that transgender people experience prolonged bias, high rates of physical mistreatment, rape, discrimination in job opportunities (Herbst et al., 2008), and sexual harassment (Factor and Rothblum, 2008; Grant, Mottet, and Tanis, 2011). Other research studies show rising rates of substance use disorders (Kecojevic et al., 2012; McCabe et al., 2013; Mereish and Bradford, 2014) and a search for treatment of substance abuse (Cochran and Mays, 2000; McCabe et al., 2013) among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people contrasted with the heterosexual population.

Past studies have revealed that almost half of the sample reported using alcohol (45%) and any non-injection drug use (49%) in the last 30 days. The most commonly used drugs are amphetamines (40%), cannabis (20%) and ecstasy (10%). Four per cent reported injecting drugs within the past 30 days. In line with previous studies that showed that transgender people are involved in cases of drug consumption behaviour perversion with about 25% of transgender people in the United States for the study reported non-cannabis drugs like cocaine, crack, amphetamines, or heroin (Garofalo et al., 2006; Herbst et al., 2008).

A meta-examination of accessible exploration demonstrates high rates of substance use among transgender people (Herbst et al., 2008) and in the same period of time while there is a need of appraisal exploration of transgender people in Washington, DC especially recognized the high rates of substance use among transgender group. There are a few unanswered inquiries, or disputable issues, about substance misuse and substance misuse treatment among LGBT people (Xavier, 2000).

Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory initially created to clarify expanded emotional wellness and substance use hazard among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, proposes that individuals from minority gatherings may encounter extra stress a consequence of disgrace connected with their minority participation in the local society. Minority stress theory connected to transgender people proposes that expanded encounters of bias, desires of encountering preference, out classed of one's minority status, and disguise of

social disgrace are procedures that put transgender people at risk of poorer wellbeing, substance use, and psychological well-being (Hendricks and Testa, 2012).

Study Objective

This study's objective is to analyse and gather an in-depth understanding of challenges faced by transgender who engaged with substance drug use. In the same time, this study aims to understand some of the psychosocial supports received by this marginal population in term of overcoming their substance use behaviour.

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted in Penang, Malaysia. Selection of 18 respondents was conducted through a snowball sampling technique due to the difficulty of getting the desired respondents.

Transgender is an umbrella term that incorporates differences in gender identity wherein one's assigned biological sex doesn't match their felt identity. This umbrella term includes persons who do not feel they fit into a dichotomous sex structure through which they are identified as male or female. Individuals in this category may feel as if they are in the wrong gender, but this perception may or may not correlate with a desire for surgical or hormonal reassignment (Meier and Labuski, 2013). For this research propose, all 18 respondents in this research identified as transgender women wished to associated themselves as women who was origin assigned male at birth. Respondents who have participated in this study were those of transgender population between the ages of 18-40 years. This chosen age range also represents the two largest populations in Malaysia which are at risk of living with HIV/AIDS.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted a total of 18 face-to-face audio-recorded interviews. Prior to the interview, the researcher verbally reviewed the research information transcript sheet of each respondent, describing the nature

of the study, its risks and benefits. Each of the interviews were analysed and transcribed carefully in order to ensure the accuracy of the data. A content analysis was conducted to better understand on the emerging themes and sub-themes of the collected data. All respondents have given their consent to participate in this study. A semi-structured interview was used as a guidance to gather an in-depth understanding of challenges faced by transgender especially to analyze the psychosocial supports received by this marginal population in term of overcoming their substance drug used behaviour. Before conducted this semi-structured interview, a standard semi-structured questionnaire was created and tested which was used in this study. This semi-structured questionnaire can be used for transgender women involved in drugs abuse users and non-drugs abuse users. The semi structured interview instrument has allowed participants to respond more freely and answer questions in an open-ended way.

Two (2) major themes have been identified in this study. The themes include (1) the challengers faced by transgender who engaged with substance drug used (2) psychosocial supports received by this marginal population in term of overcoming their substance use behaviour. Abortions on the two main findings are presented in the following discussion.

Results

A. Drugs Substance Use Behaviour Among Respondents

This study showed that almost all the respondents have never taken drugs. Only 4 respondents had taken cannabis and methamphetamine or ecstasy in last 12 months prior to the study. The 4 respondents who used drugs is categorized as transgender women while the 14 respondents who do not used drug is also been categorized as transgender women. They claimed that they had done so in order to have fun, and out of curiosity about the sort of behavioural reactions one could experience especially in night clubs with their sexual partners. Besides that, these 4 respondents have taken cannabis and methamphetamine before having sex with their life partner. These respondents felt more sexual pleasure which boosted their sexual lust during their sexual activity with their sexual partners.

However, only one of the respondents stated that the main reason of taking drugs previously because the respondents suffered from depression as a result of discrimination in the local community who can't accept the respondents' gender identity especially the life style of transgender women when a men behaved as a woman which are against the norms and culture of the local society. Besides that, all 4 of these respondents does agreed that taking drugs is one of the way making them forget their personal problem especially whenever their life partner (male) who left them alone or breaking off in a relationship as boyfriend and girlfriend in their daily life.

In the same time, the research finding indicated that, all 4 of these respondents previously have been working as sex workers to earn for a living. These entire 4 respondents have admitted that before having sex with their customers, they really voluntarily desperate needed to take drugs to alleviate pain from sexual activity as a result from offering sexual services maximally up to 5 people in one day. There are also situations where several customers have committed violent sexual intercourse such as beating and slapping these respondents while having sexual intercourse. As a result of the injuries suffered by the respondent, this situation has caused them relied on drugs substance used. By depending on drug used, these respondents admitted that, taking drugs before having sex have really reduced their pain especially focusing on the physical and emotional aspects towards dealing with customers who practiced sexual violence with these respondents.

B. Psychosocial Supports Overcoming Substance Use Behaviour

The research results clearly showed that there were different ways drug used by these 4 respondents towards ending drug abuse. The 4 respondents agreed that one of the factors that have caused them to stop taking is due to the inner spirit of them self. The respondents have agreed that substance drug used as caused long-term health problems such as problems in breathing, tuberculosis and etc in their daily life. Due to appalling health problems status, finally these respondents eventually stopped taking drugs. This study also found other, related circumstances for terminating drug use in the case of one respondent. This respondent had been arrested three times by the police due to drug abuse behaviour, while he was undergoing drug

rehabilitation in a rehabilitation centre in Malaysia. During 1.5 year stay in the drug rehabilitation centre, this respondent felt miserable and sad because there were some offenders in drug rehabilitation have attempted rape towards this respondent. Besides that, some of the offenders have condemned the feminise behaviour of this respondent and sometime they have bullied this respondent by asking this respondent to massage their body. But there were some incidents took place when this respondent voluntary had sexual activity with some of the offenders in the drug rehabilitation for having special priority facility such as smoking cigarette and threaten with good behaviour with non-violence. As a result of staying in an uncomfortable place in a drug rehabilitation centre, finally this respondent decided to quit taking the drug even today.

This research finding indicated that, being treated badly especially discrimination behaviour by the transgender people themselves against the respondent who was using needles for intravenous drug use came about in form of the transgender community despising him for his actions. Some transgender communities consider transgender people who take drugs by injection needle a subordinate class groups in the transgender community because of the ridicule and insults, the respondent stopped his drug use and remains drug free.

In this research, the support of family members does not directly help these transgender people to stop taking drugs because their drug use is mostly unknown to their families. Most of their family members don't know that these respondents facing transgender transition which their gender identity and gender expression doesn't match their gender at birth. Despite being a transgender, most of these respondents were scared if their family members would find out their drug use behaviour which would cause sadness and frustration among family members.

Discussion

The results of this research clearly demonstrated that environmental factors affecting the respondents in this study had influenced their decision to use drugs for the reasons found prevalent among them. The finding that they

were using drugs from the young age of 18 years is of concern to Malaysian society. Social support from the LGBT community in the other hand doesn't really help these respondents in this study to overcome taking drugs. All 18 respondents agreed there were several social status hierarchies among the transgender community in Malaysia especially Penang state. This study indicated that there were 2 types of social status hierarchies among drug users in transgender community which intravenous drug injecting drug users and non-injecting drug users.

All 18 respondents mentioned that majority of transgender people in Malaysia were using synthesis drugs especially cannabis and methamphetamine or ecstasy. According to 18 respondents especially those who were drug users in the past, transgender people who are intravenous drug injecting users have been seen or labeled as the lowest class among transgender community. This is because this sub community continue their life by depending on drugs and they are rapidly desperate in using drugs in continuing their daily life. This is the main reason when these transgender needed to consume drugs by injecting behaviour. These scenario might give a significant negative impact to the respondents in term of public health. As we know, HIV can be transmitted thorough sharing injecting equipment among drug users. This study found that all the 18 respondents including 4 respondents who have been using drug never undergone Voluntary Counselling Test (VCT) for more than a year. VCT tests should be performed by all the respondents who misused drugs. Surprisingly the four respondents themselves doesn't know their HIV status even there were probabilities of these respondents infected with HIV through substance drug use through sharing needles and drug injection equipment.

Nevertheless, transgender people who are non-intravenous drug injecting users are less being discriminated because they don't really depended in drug for continuing their daily life because they used drug just for a temporarily period of time especially using drugs just for a social entertainment in night club and disco. In this study, only 4 respondents had taken cannabis and methamphetamine or ecstasy in the last 12 months prior to the study. However, even though the rest of the 14 respondents haven't taken drugs in the last 12 months prior of this study, eventually all 14 respondents have experienced using drugs by non-intravenous injecting method because

they are not really depending taking it for their daily life. As the result of becoming non-intravenous injecting users in past and present, all 18 respondents felt happy and glad that they were not intravenous injecting users. These 18 respondents assume that if there were intravenous injecting drug users, without doubt they shall been discriminated and badly treated by their own transgender community which happened to their friends before who were intravenous injecting drug user.

Conclusion

Besides that, this study had explained that these respondents have lack of support in overcoming their drug use behaviour which faced discrimination from their own transgender community itself. Regardless of facing discrimination from their own community, majority of these respondents haven't shared their drug use behaviour which may cause sadness and frustration among family members.

As a conclusion, majority of the respondents in this research have not been tested VCT despite some of these respondents have involved in substance drug use in their past life. This study clearly indicated that there is still a high risk or more vulnerable to HIV transmission among these transgender women population in Malaysia especially in Penang state.

This study suggests that both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should continue to provide appropriate HIV and AIDS intervention among the transgender population. Social Work Intervention can be practiced especially dealing with Transgender population at high risk behaviour for reducing difficulties on substance use behaviour.

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