BEING A "SMART GIRL": CONSTRUCTING THE NEW IMAGE FOR FEMALE ENTERTAINMENT WORKERS, PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

BOU AMARA  5137852   SHHS/M

M.A. (HEALTH SOCIAL SCIENCE)

THESIS ADVISORY COMMITTEE: PENCHAN SHERE, Ph. D, PIMPAWUN BOONMONGKON, Ph. D, SIRIWAN GRISURAPONG, Ph. D

ABSTRACT

The 'Smart Girl' program is a HIV prevention program in Cambodia initiated by the Family Health International organization in an effort to re-construct the identities of female sex workers who are now called female entertainment workers. The intervention program was designed under public health discourse, which labeled female entertainment workers as the most at-risk population. However, the program portrays a new image as a 'Smart Girl' to female entertainment workers in order to promote self-esteem, empower female entertainment workers and make the program sound free of stigmatization. Female entertainment workers are required to adhere to certain discursive sexual practices in order to fulfill the image as a 'Smart Girl'. This study aimed at exploring the discourse on 'Smart Girl' and how it has shaped female entertainment workers' sexual subjectivities and safer sex practices and how female entertainment workers interpret, reinterpret, and negotiate with the 'Smart Girl' discourse.

This research was carried out through a postmodern-feminist lens using the qualitative research method. It was conducted in Phnom Penh city over a period of three months. The data were collected through narrative interviews, observations, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and the collection of secondary data. Nine female entertainment workers (who were participating in the 'Smart Girl' program) and six key informants such as the program/outreach staffs, a client of female entertainment workers, a health provider, and an entertainment worker supervisor were interviewed.

The findings reveal that female entertainment workers reinterpret the 'Smart Girl' discourse and reproduce their own individualized discourses. They perceive being a "Smart Girl" as being a good daughter, good wife, and good woman of the community, which has resulted in wide ranges of discursive practices including limiting the number of their sexual partners, participating in social activities in order to gain face as a good woman from society, supporting the family, and saving money for their future. However, some female entertainment workers engaged in risky behaviors in order to gain value and respect from society such as engaging themselves in materialism and spending money uselessly to show off their economic power, hence, they sometimes fall into unsafe sex practices, gambling and drug use. Female entertainment worker's sexual subjectivities are diverse and fluid. They experienced sexual pleasure and desire with the partners whom their subjectivities regard as their own husband. The contesting discourse of being a "Smart Girl" is centered on the perception of the identity of female entertainment workers. The discourse and discursive practices produced by the program perceives the female entertainment worker's identity only as a sex worker; contrary to the female entertainment worker who perceives her own identity as an ordinary woman. This creates a contestation within female entertainment worker's subjectivities. Consequently, they consider that sexual risks merely occur within sex work relationships but not in couple relationships. Thus, condoms are not used in intimate relationship as it is considered a barrier to expressing their identity as a woman.

The findings show the needs to deconstruct the existing policy and program by moving from a public health HIV reduction strategy to a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health approach which includes gender-cultural sensitivity and contextual-based approaches.

KEY WORDS: DISCOURSE DISCURSIVE PRACTICE SUBJECTIVITIES FEMALE ENTERTAINMENT WORKERS SMART GIRL.