

# Commercial Sex Workers 'Condom Use Behavior in Korea

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**Purpose.** With the continuous spread of the AIDS virus and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) throughout Asia, it has become imperative for HIV/AIDS prevention outreach programs to stress the need for using prophylactics as one form of protection. This is particularly true for commercial sex workers. This pilot study was conducted to investigate the rate of condom use among the commercial sex workers in Korea and reasons why they frequently do not wear condoms during sexual intercourse.

**Methods.** Fifty female commercial sex workers who worked in the Yong San area were recruited while outreach was performed and forty eight responses were analyzed due to two incomplete questionnaires. The data were collected on June 28, 2004 as part of an outreach program for condom use promotion.

**Results.** The subjects ranged in age from 21 to 45 years. Nearly half of the subjects (47.9%) did not consistently use condoms. The major reason for not using protection was clients' reluctances for using condoms. When condoms were used, the subjects preferred lubricant-rich and less painful condom during intercourse.

**Conclusion.** Due to the inconsistent use of condoms, it is clear that many commercial sex workers and clients are susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases. Therefore, it is important to not only educate commercial sex workers, but also to educate their pimps and clientele about the importance of condom use. In general, it is recommended that practical strategies and a policy for condom use promotion be developed.

**Key Words :** Sexual behavior, Prostitution, Female, Condoms

## INTRODUCTION

The sexual health and personal safety of women in the sex industry is an important public health issue (Plumridge & Abel, 2001). The behavior of sex workers will be a negative influence for halting the spread of sexually transmissible infections within the general population if their condom use practices continue to be inconsistent due to personal or interpersonal factors (Lau, Siah, & Tsui, 2002; Sedyaningsih-Mamahit & Gortmaker, 1999; Skegg, 1989).

There are only a few studies in the literature reporting on commercial sex workers' (CSWs) condom use in Korea (Chung, 1995; Shon & Jin, 1999). Hence, it is worthwhile to investigate the status of condom usage and the reasons why commercial sex workers do not wear condoms in order to develop effective strategies for increasing their practice of using condoms.

Since the first HIV/AIDS case was reported in 1985, the number of persons infected with HIV/AIDS has been rapidly increasing in Korea. A total of 535 people which was an increase of 34% compare to a year before, were newly infected with HIV in 2003, and this brings

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the total number of infected people to 2,540 (Korea Center for Disease Control [KCDC], 2004). This trend implies that the HIV/AIDS prevention message should be strongly stressed. Condom use is considered as an effective method not only for preventing the acquisition of the AIDS virus, but also to prevent the spread of other sexually transmitted diseases (UNAIDS, 2002).

The rate of condom use varies in different regions and countries. In other countries, condom usage among commercial sex workers shows a wide disparity, from 11% in Bangladesh (Habib, Amanullah, Daniel, & Levejoy, 2001) to 78% in Cambodia (Lane, 2003). Studies performed in other countries show that the reasons commercial sex workers do not use condoms were: 1) the lack of intimacy with their clients (Cusick, 1993), 2) less acceptance of condom use (Basuki et al., 2002), 3) the discomfort associated with wearing and using condoms (Bucardo, Demple, Graga-Vllejo, Davila, & Patterson, 2004), 4) a lack of trust in efficacy, of the condom less sexual pleasure and the belief that they have a low risk for HIV infection (Thorpe, Ford, Fajans & Wirawan, 1997), and 5) the lack of condom use negotiation skills (Lane, 2003; Qu et al., 2002; Wong, Lubek, Dy, Kros, & Chhit, 2003). However, there are very few studies for explaining why female Korean commercial sex workers don't require their clients to wear condoms.

In order to promote condom use among commercial sex workers, it is essential to understand the factors that limit the wearing of condoms and the status of their condom usage for sexual acts among the CSWs. This knowledge will be used as basic data to promote condom use among this selected population.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the rate of condom usage and to uncover the reasons why commercial sex workers ignore the importance of using condoms during sexual intercourse.

## METHODS

### *Research Design*

This is a cross-sectional descriptive pilot study. This study was done as a part of the outreach activity for an AIDS prevention program.

### *Subjects*

The subjects of this study were fifty female commercial sex workers who worked in Yongsan area, which is a small section of Seoul widely known for prostitution.

### *Procedures*

Magdalena house is a center of NGO (Non Government Organization) for commercial sex workers, and it is located in Yongsan. The NGO operating Magdalena house has been working closely with KADA (The Korean Alliance to Defeat AIDS) for HIV prevention. KADA and Magdalena house have trained peer counselors for the CSWs, and they were and are CSWs themselves. The peer counselors have specifically been educated to counsel sex workers on safe sex practices. The data for this study was collected by the researcher with the help of the trained peer counselors for the CSWs. Individual CSWs were contacted through the Magdalena house and sex markets. The researcher or the peer counselors explained the purpose of the study and briefly provided instruction to the participants. The CSWs were assured that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to fifty female commercial sex workers who agreed to participate with the study. Once the participants completed the questionnaire, they were thanked and then given packages of condoms and a small gift. Completion of the questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes. The response rate was 100%. One of the researchers collected the data on-site right after the respondents completed the questionnaires. Forty eight responses were analyzed after excluding two incomplete responses. Data were gathered on June 28, 2004.

### *Instrument*

The questionnaire included items on demographics, frequency of condom use, purchasing and preference of condoms, and the limiting factors for not wearing condoms. The demographics included age, duration of working as a commercial sex worker, and the number of clients per day. The condom use behavior of the respondents was measured using individual self-reported items. The questions required the respondents to indicate by a dichotomous answer of either "yes" or "no" if they ever had any of the following experiences: did they consistently use condoms, have they seen clients carry condoms, and did they have a preference for any specific condoms. The item of 'frequency of condom usage as offered to clients' was rated from 1 (none) to 5 (all).

### *Data analysis*

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS Win 11.0. The demographics and condom use behaviors were by

the subjects analyzed by descriptive statistical methods.

## RESULTS

### *Demographics*

Table 1 shows the demographics of the subjects. The age range is from 21 to 45 years old; 58.3% of them were from 21 to 25 years old, and 37.5% ranged from 26 to 30 years old. The rest of the subjects were over 31 years old. Regarding the length of time as a commercial sex worker, 41.7% of the respondents had worked for less than six months, 45.8% had worked from one to less than three years, 10.4% had worked from six months to less than one year, and 2.1% had worked more than three years. In terms of their daily clientele, 47.9% of the respondents had six to ten sex partners a day, 43.8% had three to five, 6.3% had two or less, and 2.1% of the subjects had more than 11 daily partners on average.

### *Condom use behavior*

The results indicated that 47.9% of the subjects did not consistently use condoms. Commercial sex workers stated their reasons for wearing condoms as protecting themselves from acquiring HIV/AIDS, pregnancies and STDs rather than due to their clients' requests (Table 2).

The major reasons for commercial sex workers not wearing condoms were "clients' reluctance" (25%), "they were safe from contracting HIV/AIDS" (8.3%), and "it takes time" (6.3%). The majority of clients (68.8%) did not carry condoms for the previous four weeks from the time point of survey, but 31.3% of the clients did carry condoms.

When commercial sex workers offered condoms to their clients, only 33.3% of the clients consistently used

condoms. The majority of commercial sex workers (91.7%) purchased condoms out of their own pockets, while only 6.3% of them received condoms from their pimps and 2.1% of CSWs received them from outreach programs.

When condoms were used, slightly more than half (52.1%) of the subjects answered that they liked a condom that was lubricant-rich and less painful during intercourse. Slightly less than half (47.9%) reported using their specific preference of condoms because they were easy to obtain in their community, while 16.7% used the condoms recommended by their friends, 6.3% used the same brand condom they had used during their first sexual experience, and only 2.1% used the condoms offered to them by their boss (pimp).

## DISCUSSION

This study was conducted in the Young San area, which is a small section of Seoul widely-known for prostitution, to investigate commercial sex workers' rate of condom use and to understand the reasons for the CSWs not consistently using condoms. The limitations of this study were only having female respondents and subjects' self-report since it is very difficult to actually monitor an individual's condom use. However, as Morisky, Ang, & Sneed (2002) have reported, each commercial sex workers' self report on condom use is considered to be solid reliable data.

We found that commercial sex workers use condoms to protect themselves from STDs, HIV/AIDS and pregnancies rather than because the clients want to use them. Only 33.3% of the clients used condoms when they were offered to them by the CSWs. The Korean commercial sex workers' condom use rate is considered better than

**Table 1.** Demographics

(N = 48)

Characteristics	Classification	N	%
Age	21 - 25	28	58.3
	26 - 30	18	37.5
	31	2	4.2
Duration of working	6 Months	20	41.7
	6 Months - < 1 Years	5	10.4
	1 Years - < 3 Years	22	45.8
	3 Years - < 10 Years	1	2.1
Number of clients/day	1 - 2	3	6.3
	3 - 5	21	43.8
	6 - 10	23	47.9
	11 - 14	1	2.1

the results from other studies. For example, one study conducted in Bangladesh on commercial sex workers' condom use showed that only 11% of 284 subjects consistently used condoms (Habib et al., 2001). Moreover, only 17% of 68 Chinese commercial sex workers consistently used condoms in Baise, which is located in the west of Guangxi Province (Qu et al., 2002). However, compared to the studies conducted in Hong Kong, Cambodia and Thailand, the results of this study results showed a lower rate of consistent condom use. For example, 74.6% of 2,074 men who were aged between 16 to 60 years old in Hong Kong consistently used condoms during the previous six months when they had sexual encounters with commercial sex workers (Lau, Siah & Tsui, 2002). Furthermore, 78% of 140 registered commercial sex workers who were working in Siem Reap, Cambodia (Lane, 2003) and 89% of the commercial sex workers in Thailand (Mills et al, 1997) consistently used condoms. Therefore, using protection is considered important to many sex workers and their clients in various Asia coun-

tries, but the promotion of condom use must be strongly emphasized in every region.

Unfortunately, the main reason for not wearing condoms is that clients do not like to use condoms. This implies that the ultimate decision for whether or not to use condoms depends on the clients. The study by Wong et al. (2003) confirmed the results that the main reason for not using condoms is the failure to persuade the clients to put on a condom before sexual intercourse. A study by Rao, Gupta, Lokshin, & Jana (2003) conducted in Calcutta, India showed that because of the clients' lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS, their preference was usually not to wear a condom. If the commercial sex workers insisted on using a condom, then they were more than likely to lose their clients. Basuki et al. (2002) reported that another reason for not wearing condoms was because condoms are cold and slimy to touch, which doesn't allow the commercial sex workers to enjoy sex as much as without them. Thus, it is necessary to store the condoms in a warmer place before use

**Table 2.** Condom Use Behavior

(N = 48)

Characteristics	Classification	N	%
Use condom consistently	yes	25	52.1
	no	23	47.9
Reasons using condoms	self protection for HIV/AIDS & pregnancy	48	100
	clients' request	0	0
Reasons not using condoms consistently	expensive	0	0
	takes time	3	6.3
	clients' reluctance	12	25.0
	uncomfortable	0	0
	safe from HIV/AIDS	4	8.3
	other reasons	4	8.3
	use consistently	25	52.1
Clients carry condoms	no	33	68.8
	yes	15	31.3
Use of condoms as offered to clients	none of clients	0	0
	hardly use	1	2.1
	half of clients	3	6.3
	most of clients	28	58.3
	every clients	16	33.3
Purchase of condom	buying myself	44	91.7
	provided by boss (pimp)	3	6.2
	received for free	1	2.1
Favored condom	no	23	47.9
	yes	25	52.1
Preference of condom(n = 25)	lubricant-rich	12	48.0
	less painful during intercourse	13	52.0
Source of information on favored condom	friend	8	16.7
	boss	1	2.1
	self experience	3	6.3
	store located nearby	23	47.9
	other	13	27.1

so that there is less discomfort to both the clients and the CSWs.

To gain a better understanding of condom usage, it is important to focus on differentiating between the group of prostitutes who use condoms and the group of prostitutes who do not use condoms. In a recent study, nine out of ten commercial sex workers offered condoms to their clients, and six out of ten clients successfully used condoms when they were offered (Lane, 2003). However, only 35% of prostitutes requested the clients use condoms when the clients were reluctant to use condoms: this indicates that the CSWs were less likely to insist when encountering clients who were reluctant to use a condom (Shon & Jin, 1999). There was one question on the questionnaire in which we asked whether commercial sex workers offered condoms to their clients, but the choice of was simply "yes" or "no" without any additional space for comments. Therefore, we do not know whether they consistently offered condoms to the clients consistently. In the future, it will be necessary to explore how often they offer condoms to their clients. Based on the finding that successful negotiations on condom use correlates to consistent condom use (Lane, 2003), it is pertinent to teach women about condom use negotiation strategies at a personal level, and to educate the general public on a community level, for developing strategies to deal with the limiting factors related to condom use. Additionally, a collective strenuous effort must be implemented in the red light districts against sex without condoms.

This study found that 8.3% of the subjects don't think they are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Several studies (Basuki et al., 2002; Walden, Mwangulube, & Makhumula-Nkhoma, 1999) have reported that commercial sex workers didn't use condoms when the clients appear healthy because they believed that these clients were free from STDs. In addition, they believed that other protective measures, such as taking antibiotics, would keep them from getting HIV/AIDS (Ford, Wirawan, Reed, Muliawan, Sutarga, 2000). This study showed that some of the subjects did not use condoms even though the number of HIV/AIDS new cases has been rapidly increasing in Korea. Nonetheless, commercial sex workers perceive AIDS as not being an important issue since the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in Korea is far lower than in western countries, India or other African countries. However, AIDS education for this group should stress that the inconsistent use of condoms

is always accompanied by the danger of getting infected with HIV/AIDS. 8.3% of the subjects marked "other reasons" for not using condoms, but they did not specify the reasons. In the future, these reasons should be identified and further studied.

A qualitative study (Bucardo et al., 2004) on 25 commercial sex workers conducted in Tijuana, Mexico reported that they do not use condoms because they are uncomfortable. More than likely, these CSWs did not negotiate with clients about condom use, and they were reluctant to report their unsafe sexual practices. Interestingly enough, this study found that the discomfort of condom use was not one of the main reasons for not using condoms. This may suggest that the commercial sex workers perceived using condoms as beneficial over the discomfort. In Basuki's study (2002), the main reason for not using condoms for both commercial sex workers and clients is the unacceptability of condoms. However, the main reason for not wearing condoms in this study was that clients do not like to wear them even though commercial sex workers perceive condom use as a protective measure. Educating only the commercial sex workers about the importance of safe sex is not enough to increase condom use. Thus, safe sex education programs for commercial sex workers and their clients should be strengthened.

The majority of the women purchased condoms out of their pockets and three women received them from their bosses (pimps). Even though we didn't study the pimps' support, it can be assumed that support from a pimp is not very significant since they do not usually supply the condoms to the commercial sex workers. A study conducted in Indonesia (Basuki et al., 2002) reported that the pimps were not supportive even though they were in the position to encourage commercial sex workers to use condoms. They even considered that condom use actually hindered their business and they did not cooperate at all with condom use programs. Thus, developing new intervention programs for condom use should consider pimps, clients and commercial sex workers.

This study shows that 31.3% of clients carry condoms whereas Basuki's study (2002) conducted in Indonesia reported that 47.9% of clients carried their own condoms. It can be thought that Indonesians have more awareness about condom use or that Korean men have expectations that the commercial sex workers will supply the condoms and therefore they don't have to bother bringing them. Perhaps this phenomenon reflects the re-



ality that carrying condoms might be perceived as "morally wrong" in Korea. However, we can't be sure which one is the right interpretation, and this question needs to be further researched.

The belief that condom use "will not decrease pleasure" correlates to consistent condom use (Thorpe et al., 1997). This study revealed that commercial sex workers prefer condoms that were less painful during intercourse. Thus, providing condoms that are lubricant-rich will increase the rate of condom use. It is important to have easy access to condoms in order to increase condom use, and this study confirms that commercial sex workers prefer condoms that are available for purchase from within their community (Hawken et al., 2002). Therefore, considering these needs and selling these kinds of condoms in the community will enhance accessibility and ultimately increase the condom use rate among commercial sex workers.

## CONCLUSION

Almost half of the subjects of our study did not consistently use condoms. The client's reluctance for using condoms was the major reason for not using condoms, and because of this decision many commercial sex workers and clients place themselves at risk for being exposed to sexually transmitted diseases. Therefore, it is imperative to not only educate the commercial sex workers, but also to educate the pimps and clients of the commercial sex workers about the importance of condom use. In addition, developing practical strategies and policies is recommended for promoting condom use promotion in this population.

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