Views on HIV self-test kit distribution strategies targeting female sex workers: Qualitative findings from Zimbabwe

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BACKGROUND
The Sisters With a Voice Program provides female sex workers (FSW) in Zimbabwe with services including HIV prevention and referral for HIV treatment and care, at 6 clinics and 30 mobile sites across the country. HIV self-testing (HIVST) may be a suitable strategy to increase HIV testing uptake and frequency among FSW and has been integrated into the program at the clinics. We investigated potential community-based models to reach FSW outside of the program’s reach, exploring views on HIVST and distribution methods amongst FSW and potential self-test kit distributors.

METHODS
Focus group discussions (FGD) were held among FSW as well as peer educators (PE), condom-promoting hairdressers, and female condom distributors known as Care Promoters, ≥18 years. Discussions were transcribed and analysed thematically.

RESULTS
From Sept 16 to Jan 17, 15 FGD were conducted across Zimbabwe with 7-10 participants each: 6 among FSW (n=54), 6 among PE (n=55); 2 among hairdressers (n=16); and 1 among Care Promoters (n=7).

Sex Workers Though knowledge of HIVST was limited, FSW felt it would provide increased privacy and convenience. If they (FSW) have been taught about self-testing, what it is, how it is done, it (testing uptake) would increase because most people like their privacy a lot…20 year old sex worker of 2 years

Most were against PE and hairdressers distributing kits. As soon as you leave she (the PE) will talk about you saying “You see the lady who just left? I have given her a self-test kit” 40 year old sex worker of 10 years

Hairdressers should not even (distribute) they will obviously remain behind and talk (about us) 20 year old sex worker of 3 years

FSW preferred healthcare workers from dedicated FSW clinics to distribute and provide information. Preference for on-site self-testing was expressed. I think that if a person wants to self-test, they should come to the clinic and be given a kit here, right here 37 year old sex worker of 8 years

CONCLUSION
When asked about views on provision of vouchers for HIVST, which could be distributed to social/sexual networks, FSW were in favour. If it’s me, I will give to my workmates at our workplace as sex workers 22 year old sex worker of 2 years

Peer Educators (PE) reported HIVST may empower FSW and provide opportunities to test clients/partners. I view it (self-testing) as a good thing, even our clients who are reluctant to visit health centres…they might accept this one and see their results on their own 36 year old sex worker of 8 years

Most PE expressed willingness to distribute and some proposed their role in self-testing could include pre-test HIV counselling alongside kit distribution. As peer educators, our role first of all is to provide counselling, educating the person we would want to give self-testing 26 year old sex worker of 3 years

Some preferred clinic-based distribution. I think if the programme is for sex workers, the test kits should be taken here (at clinic) 24 year old sex worker of 4 years

Like FSW, they felt hairdressers should not be distributors. A hairdresser is a person just like me. Maybe I would have snatched her partner or client the previous day…She might not give me the kit yet I want it because…she will be frustrated with me. Plus they can take these kits and misuse them giving her relatives instead of giving sex workers 37 year old sex worker of 8 years

Hairdressers showed willingness to distribute kits to FSW even at their households. They expressed a need to be incentivized, seeing self-test kit distribution as an opportunity for additional income. For me to be motivated to do the work, if you give me money…not to give me a salary as someone who is employed, just some money for me to value your work, it gives me strength for me to do it wholeheartedly 30 year old hairdresser of 15 years

Care Promoters felt HIVST may increase testing among FSW. They expressed willingness to distribute kits, and like FSW, shared positive views on a voucher system for HIVST kits, redeemable at clinics.

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