

Two cultures, two levels of AIDS risk

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On the basis of a field survey the authors discuss strategy for reducing the relatively high incidence of HIV infection and AIDS among China's self-employed.

Voir page 279 le résumé en français. En la página 279 figura un resumen en español.

By early 1997 over 150 000 cases of HIV/AIDS had occurred in China, and it is estimated that by 2000 the total will have reached over a million if the present trend continues (1). During the period 1987–1990 the highest incidence of cases, 491 per year, was found among the self-employed (*getibu*) population (2). A survey was conducted in 1996 with the purpose of discovering why this group was at such high risk and what could be done to improve preventive and educational measures.

Self-employment was legalized in China in 1978 and began to function alongside the public sector. At this time, employees of state enterprises generally enjoyed better wages, benefits, job security and social status than the self-employed, and social and sexual relationships and practices were influenced by official attitudes and conventions. By the mid-1980s, however, many self-employed people were earning comparatively high incomes and were able to escape the socioeconomic controls imposed on the rest of the population. This allowed them to adopt unconventional sexual behaviour, resulting in an increased risk of contracting HIV.

It was found that the self-employed were more likely than other people to engage in unprotected sex with casual partners. Most self-employed interviewees had had sex with more than one such partner and few used condoms. Because of their business activities, self-employed people tended to have sexual contacts in various parts of the country. Although there was also a fairly low level of condom use among people in the state employment sector, they were less exposed to risk because their sexual activities continued to be strongly influenced by conventional morality and official restrictions.

In China, most information on AIDS from mainstream sources has moralistic or punitive associations while failing to provide adequate

guidance on safe sex. This means that people exposed to the risk of HIV infection have to seek support from informal sources. There is a significant relationship between the involvement of self-employed people in various socioeconomic groups and their information patterns, accuracy of knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, and sexual practices. Self-employed people who have comparatively frequent contact with members of low socioeconomic groups are more likely to receive unreliable information on AIDS and to practise unsafe sex than are those who move in relatively affluent circles. Although self-employed people of high socioeconomic status have more sexual partners than others, they are also better informed about safe sex and use condoms to a greater degree. Age, marital status and educational level do not have a significant bearing on these matters. Group and subgroup culture appears to be important both in the communication of information on AIDS and in the adoption of safe sexual practices among the self-employed, especially where help is unobtainable from mainstream sources.

The attitudes, beliefs and sexual behaviour of the self-employed vary according to where they live and work. In urban areas they have better access to information on AIDS than elsewhere. The best-informed usually have comparatively high incomes and commonly visit such social centres as high-grade tearooms, saunas and karaoke bars. Casual sex and a failure to use condoms are more likely among the less affluent self-employed, who often visit less expensive street discos and other social centres. Self-employed people living outside cities have less information on AIDS and engage in unprotected sex to a greater degree than those in the cities, but most of them also move around the country less and have casual sex less frequently. Clearly, the social and geographical context strongly influences the information, knowledge and beliefs of the self-employed and their sexual practices.

It is necessary to understand people's sexual activities in connection with differences in AIDS-related risk-taking between populations, groups and cultural categories, and the implications for preventive and educational strategy. Because the self-employed behave differently from state-employed people, special educational and preventive programmes should be deployed in the various social

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networks and places where the self-employed congregate.

Official bodies should continue to inform the whole population about the links between sexual behaviour and AIDS, but should avoid the moralistic and punitive approach to the subject which has been in evidence. Efforts should be made to provide information on all aspects of safe sex within the

social, psychological and sexual contexts of groups and subgroups at high risk for HIV infection, among whom the self-employed figure prominently. ■

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Résumé

Deux cultures, deux niveaux d'exposition au risque de SIDA

Le régime de l'emploi et les contextes sociaux ou sous-culturels qui déterminent dans une large mesure la dimension sociale de la sexualité ont une influence capitale sur la sécurité ou non des pratiques sexuelles et sur les stratégies de prévention des MST et du SIDA chez les jeunes Chinois en Chine. Une étude sur le terrain des pratiques sexuelles comportant un risque de MST/SIDA dans le régime de l'emploi à deux volets appliqué en Chine a été effectuée parmi les travailleurs indépendants (officiellement dénommés «getihu») et la population employée dans les entreprises d'Etat du Sichuan (Chine). Quatre grands critères sociaux ou psychologiques de dissuasion des pratiques sexuelles à risque ont été retenus : démographie sociale et géographique, connaissances/information, contextes sociaux, enfin, inclination psychologique au risque. Les résultats de l'étude font apparaître que le changement des structures sociales et du régime de l'emploi en Chine ont une incidence sur le comportement social et les pratiques socio-sexuelles des jeunes Chinois. Il ressort des conclusions de cette étude que le contexte de vie joue un rôle prédominant dans les relations entre les caractéristiques démographiques, l'information, l'inclination psychologique au risque et l'adoption de pratiques sexuelles prudentes/à risque. Les travailleurs indépendants sont plus enclins que ceux des entreprises

d'Etat à adopter un comportement sexuel qui les expose à un risque élevé de MST/SIDA du fait que leur attitude est largement déterminée par leur appartenance à un certain groupe social ou sous-culturel. Il n'était pas possible d'établir un lien direct entre les facteurs démographiques, l'information et l'inclination psychologique au risque d'une part, les comportements sexuels prudents/à risque de l'autre, si l'on ne pouvait replacer l'ensemble de ces facteurs dans un contexte social bien précis. Le risque potentiel gagne rapidement du terrain dans des populations plus étendues du fait que de plus en plus d'employés d'entreprises d'Etat se trouvent associés au contexte non seulement socio-économique, mais aussi socio-sexuel des travailleurs indépendants et confrontés à des pratiques sexuelles non conventionnelles à mesure que la société chinoise se restructure et que le régime de l'emploi évolue. La vulnérabilité collective aux MST/SIDA que les pratiques sexuelles actuelles ont engendrée chez les jeunes travailleurs indépendants marque une nouvelle frontière pour la prévention des MST/SIDA dans la Chine d'aujourd'hui et laisse entrevoir toute l'importance de mener une action collective en appliquant des stratégies de prévention des MST/SIDA à l'intérieur même des contextes sociaux ou sous-culturels des jeunes travailleurs.

Resumen

Dos culturas, dos niveles de riesgo de SIDA

El régimen de empleo y los contextos sociales o subculturales, que determinan de modo importante la dimensión social de la sexualidad, desempeñan un papel crucial en el grado de seguridad o de riesgo de las prácticas sexuales y en las estrategias de prevención de las ETS y el SIDA entre la población joven de China. Se realizó un estudio sobre el terreno de las prácticas sexuales que entrañan riesgo de contraer ETS/SIDA entre los trabajadores por cuenta propia (oficialmente denominados getihu) y la población empleada en las empresas estatales en Sichuan, en el marco del régimen doble de empleo vigente en China. Se examinaron cuatro importantes criterios sociales o psicológicos de disuasión de las prácticas sexuales arriesgadas: demografía social y geográfica, conocimientos/información, contextos sociales y propensión psicológica al riesgo. Según se desprende del estudio, el cambio de las estructuras sociales y del régimen de empleo repercute en el

comportamiento social y en las prácticas sociosexuales de la juventud china. Los hallazgos del estudio confirman que el contexto de vida desempeña un papel predominante en la correlación entre las características demográficas, la información y la propensión psicológica al riesgo, por un lado, y la adopción de prácticas sexuales seguras/arriesgadas. Los trabajadores por cuenta propia tienen una propensión mayor que los de las empresas estatales a adoptar un comportamiento sexual de alto riesgo de contraer ETS/SIDA, ya que su actitud viene ampliamente determinada por su pertenencia a un grupo social o subcultural dado. No era posible establecer una vinculación directa entre el aspecto demográfico, la información y la propensión psicológica al riesgo, por un lado, y los comportamientos sexuales seguros/arriesgados, por otro, si el conjunto de estos factores no se situaba en un contexto social preciso. El riesgo potencial va ganando rápidamente terreno en poblaciones más

amplias, pues cada vez son más numerosos los empleados de empresas estatales que se encuentran asociados al contexto no sólo socioeconómico sino también sociosexual de los trabajadores por cuenta propia, a la vez que confrontados a prácticas sexuales no convencionales a medida que va estructurándose la sociedad china y evolucionando el régimen de empleo. La vulnerabilidad colectiva a las ETS y al SIDA derivada de

las actuales prácticas sexuales entre los jóvenes trabajadores por cuenta propia marca una nueva frontera para la prevención de las ETS y del SIDA en la China de hoy y da una idea de la importancia de emprender una acción colectiva para aplicar estrategias de prevención dentro del propio contexto social o subcultural de los jóvenes trabajadores.

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