

## AWARENESS OF HIV/AIDS AMONG LONG DISTANCE TRUCK DRIVERS: A CASE STUDY OF ABBOTTABAD, KPK

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**Abstract;** It is a well acknowledged fact that the lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and its associated risky behaviour can greatly influence the transmission of this disease among the high risk population in Pakistan. The present study investigates the nature of awareness about HIV/AIDS among the long distance truck drivers. This research was conducting in the area of Mandian which is also known as Missile Chowk located in Abbottabad City and Havillain. The main objectives of this study were to find out nature and level, and mode of prevention regarding HIV/AIDS by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. To explore the information on this sensitive issue, fieldwork was conducted for six months in 2016 and informal in-depth interviews were conducted from forty selected long distance truck drivers. For obtaining more details three focus group discussion were also held along with seven case studies to cross check that data. The findings of this study revealed that most of the truck drivers were not much aware about the HIV/AIDS, and had only insufficient knowledge about its transfer. The proportion of respondents having correct and comprehensive knowledge of transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS was less. The findings of the study suggest that unsafe sexual practices among long distance truck drivers make them most vulnerable and high risk group.

**Key Words:** HIV/AIDS, Risk, Prevention, Transmission, Disease, Vulnerable

### INTRODUCTION

HIV/AIDS is characterized as one of the most crucial social issues being encountered by the world today (UNAIDS. 2004). In lieu of this, the present study was conducted with the prime objective to explore and analyse risk of HIV/AIDS among long distance truck drivers in Pakistan. This study was an attempt to understand those underlying factors which contribute towards the increase of HIV/AIDS patients. It further highlights issues that are involved in the spread of AIDS epidemics among truck drivers.

Pakistan to a large extent is estimated to be a low-prevalence, high-risk country for the spread of HIV infection (Bhurgr, 2006). Pakistan is a vulnerable country due to low levels of literacy, poverty, and due to the presence of high risk groups such as transgender, internal and external migrants, long-distance truck drivers, commercial sex workers and drug users who can transmit this disease through needle-sharing and reuse of syringes without proper sterilization. AIDS

epidemic have major impact over the transport community in Pakistan. Truck drivers have to travel on long routes and remain away from home for many days. They are in need of home facilities during travelling like shelter, food, sleep and sexual intimacy. These needs provoke them to contact sex workers who can satisfy their sex urge. Truck drivers stop at different roadsides hotels and *dhabbas* where a pimp or a middle man is present to connect these truck drivers with sex workers on cheap price. Sometimes sexual workers also provide shelter and food to them. Several studies indicate that mobile population particularly long distance truck drivers are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS as their oneliness compels them to visit commercial sex workers quite frequently (Singh NY and Malaviya AN., 1994).

Many studies conducted on HIV transmission documented that migrant workers for being away from their families are thought to be at higher risk for acquiring HIV infection (Haour-Knipe M.; 1993). Several factors have been identified for this increased probability of

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HIV/AIDs such as prolonged separation from family and loved ones, insufficient social and health care services, availability of sex workers, drug addiction and lack of knowledge about transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDs (Dixon-Fyle K, Mulanga C. 2004; Baeten, et al. 2002). Studies have shown that incorrect information on HIV transmission could lead to develop apprehensions and misperceptions about the personal risks of disease transmission. A qualitative study conducted with 300 Indian truck drivers also documented substantial deficits of information with respect to HIV transmission and prevention directly associated with HIV risk and preventive behaviour (AD Bryan, et al., 2001). Another similar study was conducted in Pakistan to examine the sexual behavior of truck drivers and their helpers. The study yielded in-depth information from 300 truck drivers and concluded that having multiple sexual partners is a common practice among truckers compounded with insufficient knowledge of the risks of sexually transmitted infections due to unprotected sex (Agha, Sohail; 2002).

The present study also endorses these findings obtained from previous studies. Truck drivers interviewed in this study had little knowledge about HIV/AIDS, as their education level were very low. They hardly knew the actual causes of this disease. Unprotected sex with prostitutes and sharing of syringes by colleagues were found major reasons of increasing this epidemic of Aids among truck drivers. They also had insufficient knowledge about the correct use of condoms and its role in the prevention of HIV transmission. Many NGOs have started introducing AIDS awareness programs among truck drivers. Findings from this study suggest that this is a serious issue which needs to be dealt carefully otherwise it will spread throughout the country.

In this connection, the study was conducted with the prime objective to understand the sexual behaviour of truck drivers as well as their level of knowledge and awareness regarding the transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the study mainly drew upon qualitative research methods which were found more useful to gather in-depth information. Forty truck drivers were chosen through Purposive and then snow ball sampling to investigate their perception, attitude and knowledge regarding HIV/AIDS. The selected respondents were interviewed in an informal manner during multiple sessions with them. All the interviews were conducted in local language with the help of interview guide.

### **Anthropology and HIV/AIDS**

HIV/AIDS is fatal disease and spreading everywhere around the world. It becomes a threatening issue and anthropologists are always keen to explore those issues which play a vital role in human life. HIV/AIDS not only make people physically suffer from this disease but it also becomes a social stigma for the patient and its entire social circle due to its association with sex work, drug use and same-sex and transgender sexual practices.

HIV/AIDS is not just a potential threat to the physical well-being of a person, disturbing biological condition of people but it is a social phenomenon as well, reflecting a threat to the core social values involving culture, morality and religion. Anthropology is the study of humans and its subject matter deals with the social and cultural life of people. If any phenomena affect social life of people and changes people's life style and behaviour, it becomes the area of concern for anthropologists.

As HIV/AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease mainly caused and spread through unprotected sex. Increase in the ratio of this kind of disease in a society where extra marital relations are strictly prohibited and considered sinful and socially tabooed is strange and draws our attention.

HIV/AIDS is a deadly virus and newly emerging phenomena in Pakistan. Anthropological study of HIV/AIDS may dig out different perspectives of HIV/AIDS which can be useful for the policy makers and health professionals to control and eradicate this disease from our society.

## RESULTS

AIDS and HIV is a serious illness to deal with that can make people lives vulnerable. Truck drivers are more prone to become victim of this disease due to their indulgence in unhealthy activities. Field findings and in-depth interviews with truck drivers reveal that their level of awareness was found very low. They lack basic knowledge about this disease. Main sources of information which they identified were friends and colleagues due to the fact that they mostly encountered them in their life. Their social circle comprised mostly illiterate people like them and the information they shared among themselves is likely to be incorrect. This was the reason they developed wrong ideas and misconceptions about HIV/AIDS. They firmly believe that there is no chance for HIV/AIDS patient to survive. They believed that HIV/AIDS is incurable disease and person having such disease should be ready for his demise any time. The very idea of treatment of HIV/AIDS is often brushed aside. Religious scholars and media were mentioned as other sources of information but only by those few who had exposure and access to them. Generally those respondents who offered pray in Mosques and listened to the speeches of local *Molvis* considered HIV/AIDS as punishment for their sins. TV and FM Radio were major source of entertainment for truck drivers and they got to know about AIDS only through advertisements.

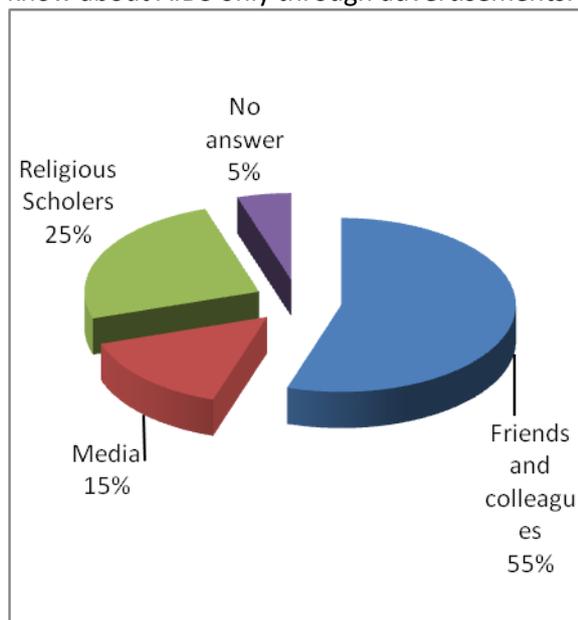


Figure. 1: Source of Information

## Information about AIDS

Five major transmission sources of AIDS came into light while exploring the nature of knowledge among truck drivers. Blood transfusion and sexual contact were major sources of transmission of AIDS in the eyes of truck drivers. Truck drivers were of the view that frequent sexual contact with transgender and sex workers was main factor responsible for HIV/AIDS. Still majority of them did not adopt precautionary measures while keeping sexual relations with multiple sex partners. They believed that transferring blood is dangerous and can cause multiple diseases like Hepatitis- C, TB and AIDS. Transmission of AIDS through sharing of clothes, injectable drugs and sharing same syringe were other sources that truck drivers had known.

Majority of truck drivers denied the fact that injectable drugs are the source of transmission of this disease. Few agreed that injectable drugs can cause HIV/AIDS. Majority of truck drivers put the blame on quacks and dispensers who used unsterilized syringes and are responsible for spreading up HIV/AIDS. Few truck drivers had idea that unsterilized equipment used by barbers are highly unsafe and make people more prone to this disease. Sex with animals, homosexual practices, punishment of sinful acts, multiple sex partners, sex with menstruating women and intake of medicines that increase sexual stamina were identified as main causes by truck drivers which in their opinion can victimise people of HIV/AIDS. They believed that sex with menstruating women can cause HIV/AIDS considering that this act is forbidden in religion and HIV/AIDS is punishment of committing this sinful act. All these sexual activities were common among truck drivers. Cases were found in which truck drivers had sex with animals and homosexual behaviour was also found a common practice among truck drivers. Many of them had relations with multiple sex workers and they used drugs that could likely increase their sexual power. Some of them also held the view that indulgence in these sinful activities is the main reason behind HIV/AIDS. For them, HIV/AIDS is basically wrath of Allah as Allah brings wrath towards disobedient and sinners.

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Study explored knowledge of prevention against HIV/AIDS among the truck drivers. Prevention of AIDS by avoiding multiple sexual contacts is perceived by truck drivers as best preventive method and strategy. Many truck drivers preferred single sex partner to avoid AIDS. Many of them considered that sex with transgender and male sex workers only can cause HIV/AIDS so they avoid having sex with these two groups. Use of condoms as precautionary measure was quite uncommon among truck drivers and this put them at high risk of acquiring this disease. Only ten percent respondents were found using condoms to avoid HIV/AIDS. Ninety percent respondents preferred using disposable syringes and insisted quacks and dispensers to use new syringes to avoid any risk. Truck drivers considered keeping single sex partner most effective prevention technique against HIV/AIDS. They avoid sexual relations with multiple sex workers to keep away from havoc of this disease. Using disposable syringes was also preferred by them to avoid HIV/AIDS.

Sexual behaviour of truck drivers was also deeply analysed to figure out reasons of high ratio of HIV/AIDS among this group. Majority of the respondents had extramarital relations. Intense desire for sex and unavailability of wife pushed them to keep sexual relations with sex workers. Some respondents preferred to keep one sex worker to avoid HIV/AIDS and due to lack of money. Majority of the respondents admitted to have contact with multiple sex workers. These sex workers included both male and female. Some of them also had sexual relations with their helpers although their number is less. The alarming fact is that most of times these sexual practices were unsafe and unprotected that fosters HIV/AIDS to target this group of population.

Only few respondents were found restricted to their wives for sex just because they considered it a sin. Truck drivers' attitude towards AIDS patient was also found conventional and improper. Most of the respondents avoid keeping any type of contact with AIDS patients. Majority of them were even not ready to shake hand with AIDS patients. They avoid sharing food, clothes and bed with such patients. Majority of truck drivers refused to work with

any person who is suspected to have AIDS. For them, it is not possible to fully avoid any kind of physical contact with such person whom you are working with. For this reason, they do not work with AIDS patients to avoid contracting AIDS. Truck drivers were of the view that such patients should not intermingle and must be kept separate from other people. This attitude forced people to keep their disease secret and many respondents disclosed that keeping this disease secret is necessary to counter societal pressure and stigmatization. The findings from the present study as well as available literature on HIV/AIDS prevention indicates that this issue involves sexual relations and intimacy which is in most cultures considered a taboo subject and so can be easily shrouded in secrecy (Remennick & Elmelech, 1997). In short, it is pertinent to address economic, political, social and cultural factors that render people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS in order to find a sustainable solution (UNAIDS, 2002). It is crucial to pay attention to specific high risk groups and communities. In this connection, the present study was conducted and its findings illustrated different perspectives of HIV/AIDS. The results of the study show that truck drivers lack substantial and comprehensive knowledge regarding transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS. Truck drivers consider it justified to have extramarital relations with sex workers in the absence of their wives. Bad company, unhealthy environment and poverty further worsened the situation and homosexuality and sex with animals has become common practice among truck drivers. There is a greater need to make HIV/AIDS related information available to all individuals and groups regardless of their education level and profession. Attention must be paid to develop IEC materials and design TV programs in different local languages to disseminate this much needed information in a culturally appropriate manner.

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