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A study of 500 truckers in Zimbabwe reveals that truck drivers play a major role in the spread of HIV and AIDS. The most vulnerable are the married and economically active people between the ages of 30-50 years. Beitbridge and other stopovers in Zimbabwe have been hives of activity with trucks roaring day and night. At these centres drivers meet commercial sex workers. The study shows that those who have been in the industry for long have indicated multiple sex partners and the figure increasing in relation to the number of years spent plying the same route. 40 per cent of the truckers have been treated of sexual Transmitted Diseases (STIs). The conclusion is that truck drivers play a role in the spread of HIV and AIDS. This has an impact on the economy of Zimbabwe, since the most affected is the productive age in terms of the supply of labour to all the sectors of the economy. It is therefore recommended that more restrictions be put on drivers as to the carrying of unauthorised passengers, and awareness information be disseminated along the highways to both drivers and cross border traders.

Keywords: Haulage, Commercial Sex Workers, Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

Introduction

The transportation of goods and services in an economy is analogous to the circulation system in the human body. Successful nourishment and development of the body/economy is dependant on the efficiency of the system. Zimbabwe is a landlocked country. The performance of the country is directly related to the road, rail network and air. Central to the transportation business is grain, coal, minerals, livestock and plant equipment to just but mention a few. The National Railways of Zimbabwe and its predecessor the then Rhodesia Railways used to enjoy monopoly over bulk transportation of goods. The SADC deregulation of transport in the early 1990s ushered a new era. Zimbabwe being a signatory to the SADC convention followed suite. The member states favoured higher Gross Vehicle Mass (GVM) and longer vehicles. The deregulation in effect allowed greater participation in transportation by road. The result was a massive influx of haulage trucks in Zimbabwe. In 1998 after the signing of bilateral agreement with South Africa, 1 809 haulage trucks were registered in Zimbabwe, a figure which rose to 4 056 in 2004. (Ministry of Transport Vehicle Registry: Zimbabwe 2005).

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The deregulation of the transport industry coincided with the period HIV and AIDS was reaching crisis level in the SADC region. A situational analysis of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe in 2000 reveals that the prevalence rate was 35% in the 15-49 age group a situation which does not spare truck drivers. HIV and AIDS is a serious global problem, which has serious economic impact. Southern Africa remains the epicentre of the global AIDS epidemic (UNAIDS 2002). Zimbabwe is the geographical hub of Southern Africa and the nucleic focus of its roads and rail networks. This means that the activities of truckers are concentrated heavily on Zimbabwe. The lifestyles of the truckers have a huge bearing on the societies they mingle with. The worrying prevalence of the pandemic in their sole medium of operation presents a serious challenge to the truckers.

A closer look at the human resource at the centre of transportation shows that the truckers work in extreme difficult conditions. They travel across borders and make several stopovers often away from their homes. The Zimbabwe road traffic rules permit age 25 to be able to drive a haulage truck. This is incidentally, the prime age of sexual activity.

Haulage according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary is to ‘transport’ goods. It is concerned with the carriage of goods by road in lorries. Under clandestine activity of human trafficking prosper alongside haulage of goods. In 2002, 30 people who had been locked in haulage truck container suffocated to death. The truck was in transit between Zimbabwe and Botswana.

While it is generally held that the HIV and AIDS pandemic is a result of a number of factors, the part played by truck drivers in Zimbabwe has to be investigated. The drivers are separated from their families and spouses for long periods. Mobility is generally associated with high risk of HIV infections because of greater social interaction and contacts that put a premium of indulgence in risky social behaviour (ZHDR 2003). In the process of transporting goods, HIV and AIDS are also spreading. The holistic perspective of the problem can never be established without factoring in massive haulage trucking activity that roars day and night in Zimbabwe. There is therefore need to explore possible symbiotic relationship.

Relevance of study: Truckers play an important role of transporting goods and services from one point to another. While it is generally held that HIV and AIDS pandemic is a result of a number of factors, the part played by truck drivers in Zimbabwe has to be investigated. The researchers’ concern go beyond direct implications on the transport business. The impact cuts across the whole economy. Other economic sectors have been seriously hit by this pandemic with labour being in short supply.

Statement of the problem: Zimbabwe is the geographical hub of Southern Africa and the nucleic focus of its roads and rail networks. This means that the activities of truckers are connected heavily on Zimbabwe. The lifestyles of the truckers have a huge bearing on the societies they mingle with. The worrying prevalence of the pandemic in their sole medium of operation presents a serious challenge to the truckers. The Zimbabwe road traffic rules permit age twenty-five to be able to drive a haulage truck. This is
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incidentally the prime age of sexually activity. The drivers are separated from their families and spouses for long periods. In the process of transporting goods, HIV and AIDS is also spreading. The holistic perspective of the problem can never be established without factoring in massive haulage trucking activity that roars day and night in Zimbabwe. There was therefore need to explore the possible symbiotic relationship.

Materials and Methods
A survey was carried to collect information. Data was collected using questionnaires. In completing the questionnaire, the respondents had a choice of either filling it in themselves or had to be completed by the interviewers while they did the talking. From the six main routes used by truckers, which link Zimbabwe to its neighbouring countries, the researchers used judgemental sampling. The focus route was Harare- Beitbridge, which is the gateway to South Africa, the country’s largest trading partner. This is the busiest route. Beitbridge also captures truckers from Bulawayo, Gweru, Chiredzi and Mutare. 500 truckers were intercepted.

Results and Discussion
The role played by truck drivers in fuelling HIV and AIDS has been widely studied the world-over. The studies have shown that HIV and AIDS prevalence is among truckers than the general populace. In this study, we have found that even among the truckers themselves, there is an age group that is more vulnerable. The most active group falls within the ages 30–50 years. This group, according to the study is the ‘family’ group. This is the married and economically active category, and constituted 69 per cent of those sampled in the study.

The study also revealed that truck drivers spend long hours outside family life, with some going for more than 2 weeks. (ZHDR 2003:65). About 83 per cent confirmed that they do not travel with their spouses and this puts them under vulnerable situations and end up having extra-marital relationships (multiple). 40 per cent of the truckers who participated in the study revealed that they had had more than sixteen different partners, outside marriage, in the past 6 months.

The informal traders who ply the Zimbabwean highways through Beitbridge who are more than ready for sex in exchange for free transport have compounded this problem, according to the truckers. The truckers, said, this is a bait which most of them fail to dodge. Also along the highways to Beitbridge, there are several stopovers, and the truckers take rest at these roadside centre. 95 per cent showed that they stop at more than two of the centres. The stopovers offer facilities like accommodation, food and this is where most commercial sex workers target the truckers, who are believed to have large amounts of foreign currency. This is how truckers come to be so familiar with some of these ‘ladies of the night’, and some of them ending up as permanent ‘small houses’. (Small house is a Zimbabwean term referring to a relationship between man and woman outside marriage, a person with whom that relationship is being undertaken or the place where that relationship is taking place).
Most of the truckers who participated in the study have more than 5 years in the industry. Some even indicated that they have more than 15 years. The more time one spends in one job, the more he/she becomes well versed with the nature, place and conditions of the job. This includes the people he/she interacts with. The study shows that those who have been in the industry for long, have indicated multiple sex partners and the figure increasing in relation to the number of years spent plying the same route(s). 66 per cent indicated that they had more than 5 years in the industry and among these 58 per cent had had many sex partners during their tour of duty. Also as one gets used to sex outside marriage, he/she may be conditioned to have the false comfort that extra-marital relationships are not bad at all. Hence more and more partners as one stays in the industry.

All truck drivers who were intercepted, cross the border into South Africa. The drivers easily get money from the passengers they transport into and outside South Africa, and also from ‘underground’ dealings they are involved in. This makes them ‘powerful’ financially and become targets of commercial sex workers. Also mere possession of money alone, makes one change behaviour, and in many cases than not, they (truckers) end up spending it on prostitutes, or on permanent ‘small houses’. This is so, since they always meet the same and familiar people at these stopovers. From the study 93 per cent of the truckers meet familiar people at these roadside centres. About 50 per cent put up overnight or spend a day at the centres, while 40 per cent spend around 3 hours and 10 per cent between 4 and 5 hours at these centres.

Forty per cent of the truckers have been treated of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and 40 per cent confirmed they use condoms on their outside marriage sex errands. Most of them provide themselves condoms (54 per cent). From this it reveals that most of the truckers are very much aware of the existence of HIV and AIDS pandemic. However, the correct and continuous use of condoms is a major concern. The study shows that these truckers meet familiar people along the highways; hence the use of condoms is highly disregarded. It is natural that there may be strict use in the initial days of the relationship, but with time and higher frequency, people tend to trust each other and neglect the condom use, hence the low percentage (40 per cent) according to the study.

Eighty-one per cent of the drivers have been educated of HIV and AIDS, but only 33 per cent knows its status (and have been tested). This is natural, people usually are so afraid of the unknown, and could be carriers of the disease. Also 93 per cent discuss HIV and AIDS at home, aboard trucks with passengers and with fellow drivers. However, the truckers continue to indulge in unsafe sex and spread the disease; and affecting their families. It seems, the more these drivers get used to this, the more they falsely feel they are immune to the pandemic.

The most active age group, according to the study is the 30–50 years, and this is the married category. Since these drivers spend most of their time outside their family lives they end up indulging in extra-marital relationships that will make them vulnerable to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. They also do not travel with their spouses, and at the
same time mingle with members of the opposite sex during their tour of duty, making them easy prey to commercial sex workers.

As revealed by the study most of these truckers have multiple sex partners, and some have been treated of STIs, showing that condom use is very minimal among this lot. This is because of the trust that develops with the prostitutes, since they end up having a more or less of a permanent relationship.

The study also reveals that the more experienced one is, as a truck driver, the number of trips per month and the length of time spent away from home, on each trip, have a contributory influence on one becoming more vulnerable to the pandemic. Also the number of stopovers on the highways (that is highways that link Beitbridge to the rest of Zimbabwe) and the time spent on these centres are some of the major factors that contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS by truckers.

The study also shows that the major stopovers along the highways that converge at Beitbridge border post include Masvingo, Ngundu, Rutenga, Mhandamabwe, Gwanda, Chiredzi, Fairfield and Beatrice. These centres are hubs of commercial sex workers, and truckers stop at the centres to get their services.

The non-continuous use of condoms by truckers had contributed to the spread of HIV and AIDS. The fact that these truckers self-provide the condoms may also be an impediment to curbing the spread. Companies, seems, play minimal role in their provision. Many truckers have not been tested of HIV and AIDS; and spread the disease ‘unknowingly’.

The major concern is that the truckers spend long periods from their wives and in most cases they have more money and influence than the people (mostly women) they mingle with. Transactional sex is therefore rampant with the women who ply the stopovers and most of these women are carriers who may infect a considerable number of truckers before they themselves succumb to the pandemic.

Although STI rate is 40 per cent among the truckers, this is considered very high, considering the risk associated with the infection. Also the truckers, according to the research, carry condoms around but a larger percentage does not use them. This shows that they are aware of the risk and existence of HIV and AIDS but their behaviour show otherwise. The majority of the truckers have not been tested for fear of confirming their suspicions.

**Conclusions**

The study has revealed that truckers play a major role in the spread of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe. This confirms the results of similar studies in Kenya and Uganda that high HIV infection rates are among the major highways (ZHDR 2005:65). Also the most vulnerable are the married people, especially those who had been in the industry for longer periods, meaning that whole families are being affected.

The working conditions of the truckers give fertile ground for the spread of the fatal disease. These include the availability of cash, easy association with commercial
sex workers, the attitude of informal traders who want to make 100% profit, the mushrooming of roadside centres and long periods from home, among others.

The study showed that seasoned truckers more or less depict a loose behaviour and contribute in the spread of STIs. Carrying passengers, who are mostly women, enhances this. The spread of STIs goes hand in hand with the spread of HIV and AIDS. The cross border traders originate from different parts of the country. This means crossing borders results in the pandemic being spread to different countries in the SADC region and different parts of the country. Also, despite being knowledgeable on the HIV and AIDS issues, there is poor use of condoms, hence the continuous prevalence of HIV and AIDS cases.

**Recommendations**

The initiation of the relationships between truckers and their sex partners is bi-directional. Either side can initiate the affair. In this case there should be an intensification of HIV and AIDS information dissemination to both parties. There should be local workers at the stopovers that disseminate HIV and AIDS information to truckers and commercial sex workers (CSW).

Condoms should be distributed freely along Zimbabwean highways. This, at least reminds the truckers and their partners to engage in safer sex. Drivers should not also be allowed to carry unauthorised passengers. There should be a heavy penalty for this, to discourage such a tendency.

Drivers should be encouraged to get tested after certain periods in the transport industry. This somewhat deters one from indulging in unsafe and extra-marital affairs. Also companies should be encouraged to employ more drivers so as to reduce the frequency one driver plies the highways. Also these companies should be encouraged to provide the facility of travelling with one’s spouse whenever the driver is on a long tour of duty. Companies should provide condoms and gloves (in case of accidents). It should be each company’s policy to make sure the truckers have their pack before they get onto their long journeys.

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