

# Application of fear appeals in HIV/AIDS prevention among female sex workers

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Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is one of the deadliest known viruses of the modern era. Its high incidence, prevalence, mortality, and disability on the one hand, and the global epidemic, long incubation period, and long life years on the other hand, have become health, social, and economic problems, which with high care costs, pose a serious threat to health and economy of communities [1, 2]. Iran is facing the third wave of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), where the route of sexual transmission has surpassed other ways. Statistically, more than half of HIV-positive women became infected through sexual contacts. The increasing incidence of AIDS among women around the world has been identified by health organizations as a global challenge due to its widespread impact on reproductive health [3]. One of the most vulnerable groups in the world at high-risk of HIV infection is the group of female sex workers. Nowadays, the role of sex workers in spreading the HIV/AIDS epidemic is evident. Sex workers are at high-risk of contracting HIV/AIDS through their clients as well as transmitting the disease to their sexual partners [4], with the reason being frequent changes in sexual partners and high percentage of unprotected sex. In addition, high poverty rate, addictions, multiple injuries and severe violence, childhood rape, injuries related to physical and mental health as well as economic, social, and gender inequalities, have made it difficult not only for these women, but for all women to persuade their sexual partners to have safe sex [5]. In the third national AIDS control program in Iran, the first strategy included educational and information activities for different target groups, whereas the fifth strategy was based on preventing sexual transmissions. These two strategies implemented by the government show that despite the current

training, the awareness and attitude of this vulnerable group is not at the desired level [6]. Based on indisputable principles of human rights related to health, a special counseling center for vulnerable women has been established to control the HIV/AIDS epidemic among vulnerable women in the community. One of the target groups of this center is female sex workers, and one of the important goals of the center is to train these women [7]. Considering that the ways of transmitting HIV/AIDS classify it as a behavioral disease, the use of fear appeal approach in trainings can prevent these women and their sexual partners from HIV/AIDS, keeping them physically and mentally healthy. Therefore, it is possible to create fear in female sex workers by being aware of HIV/AIDS complications and consequences. Fear has been described as a variety of feelings, such as being scared, anxious, and nauseated as well as involving a degree of worry and anxiety. Moreover, fear leads to stimulation of activities to reduce these undesirable feelings [8]. Most advertisements encourage the audience by revealing the benefits and sources of a behavior. However, the content of fear appeals can be used to persuade the audience by showing the harms of not doing a behavior. Unlike regular ads with positive messages, fear appeals include content that the audience does not want to encounter. Therefore, fear appeals are persuasive messages designed to frighten people by presenting unfortunate events, which happen if the advices are not followed [9]. In the fear appeal approach, one compares his/ her perception of the amount of risk present with a measure that indicates how acceptable the risk is. If the perceived risk is greater than the acceptable risk, the person is motivated to reduce the risk in some way. Therefore, the general framework of using the fear appeal in HIV/AIDS prevention in female sex

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workers is to highlight the negative consequences, which can occur if a behavior or attitudes do not change. Arousal from fear is a common tactic for various issues in social policy, such as encouraging people to change their unhealthy lifestyle by stopping smoking, preventing pregnancy, exercising more, having a balanced diet, and not drinking while driving. In general, fear appeals can be divided into physical and social. The physical fear appeals are related to the threats affecting the body, and the social fear appeals are associated with the threats related to social acceptance [10]. To prevent HIV/AIDS in female sex workers, the appeal of physical fears, such as opportunistic brain infections, brain tumors, endocrine disorders, drug side effects, anxiety disorders, depression, mania, insanity, dementia, insomnia, and addictions, can be applied to prevent HIV/AIDS. Additionally, in terms of the appeal of social fear, stigma, prejudice, social isolation, and restrictions in employment opportunities and marriage, can be used as constraints to prevent HIV/AIDS.

Ultimately, fear means feeling very nervous, anxious, and disturbed, which can be felt while knowing about HIV/AIDS. In fact, what is used in fear appeals to encourage AIDS prevention, is to describe the negative and painful consequences of HIV infection in female sex workers. These preventive measures are designed and displayed to evoke feelings of fear and anxiety among at-risk individuals, and to avoid unprotected sexual behaviors.

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