

Barriers for Early HIV Testing among Road and Club-based Female Sex Workers in Catalonia

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Objectives

To identify potential barriers to early HIV testing and to elucidate approaches in order to improve HIV screening among female sex workers (FSWs) that operate along roads and clubs between Barcelona and Girona, Catalonia.

Methods

From August 2009-April 2010, a qualitative study was undertaken using observation, mapping, key informant interviews and semi-structured interviews of 35 FSWs at commercial sex sites and at reference gynaecological services.

Results

Nineteen (54.3%) were club-based and 12 (34.3%) road-based. The mean age was of 27.7 years and they were mainly from Eastern Europe (51.0%) and Latin America (36.0%). Only 54.0% had ever tested for HIV. The following themes emerged as HIV testing barriers:

(1) Perceived low HIV risk despite reporting unprotected sex and insufficient knowledge on condom breakage management.

‘Once the condom broke and I put on vinegar, I washed, urinated.... I did everything not to get pregnant’
(26 years old, Romania)

Most believed that they could tell whether clients were HIV-positive by their appearance;

‘AIDS is noticed because people are skinny and the white of the eye is not very white, and at least this is what girls say’
(24 years old, Romania)

(2) Transport difficulties and inconvenient hours; (3) Stigma both internalized by FSWs and projected by health workers; (4) Concerns about lack of privacy and confidentiality of test results;

‘I go to a private gynaecologist because they don’t ask so many questions and I don’t need to wake up early’
(24 years old, Romania)

and (5) Lack of registration to the health system since most were undocumented migrants and were highly mobile.

‘They say you can not come over to the hospital if you don’t have the card, you have to pay 120€ for a visit in the emergency or in the hospital’
(23 years old, Romania)

Conclusions

FSWs, in particular those standing along the road, have specific needs and encounter specific challenges for testing. Effective HIV testing approaches for this group might include offering point-of-care tests combined with education and legal services for FSWs, and addressing stigmas of FSWs by providing education and information to health professionals. FSWs testing coverage should be incorporated in national AIDS Action Plans, as a separate and specific action point.



Photos courtesy of www.aragirona.cat

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