

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SEX WORKERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA REGARDING THE ACCESS TO AND USE OF HIV PREVENTION METHODS: CONDOMS AND PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS (PrEP)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sex workers are exposed to a significantly higher risk of acquiring the HIV infection, alongside with men who have sex with men and people who inject drugs. **In the Republic of North Macedonia the HIV incidence is getting exponentially higher amongst populations under substantial risk.** Having this into consideration, it is rather necessary to make more attempts and put more effort in order to protect and prevent the HIV infection. In this Report, the data gathered from four focus groups (n=33) sessions held in Skopje, Gostivar and Strumitsa in October 2019 is documented and presented. The results outline the experiences and perceptions of various subpopulations among sex workers in the Republic of North Macedonia regarding the access to and use of prevention methods for HIV protection and other sexually transmitted infections, and identify the areas where prevention services can be strengthened and expanded.

KEY RESULTS pertaining to the consistent use of condoms:

- There is a high degree of awareness among sex workers about the risks of having an unprotected sexual intercourse, as well as sufficient knowledge of HIV and other STIs and the ways of their transmission;
- The vast majority of sex workers have regular gynecological exams and HIV and other STIs tests, predominantly utilizing the services of civil organizations;
- The preferred access to condoms is via the civil organizations, due to the facts that they can obtain them free of charge and they do not feel stigmatized;
- However, in the afternoon and evening hours this access is rather limited and they have to purchase the condoms at a price which is not quite affordable for them;
- A portion of the sex workers do not use condoms consistently;
- The use of condoms with their partners is exceptionally rare and the same applies to clients for whom they believe are HIV negative;
- The price, the reduced sensation of pleasure, the client's/partner's practice when it comes to condom use and the high expenses incurred by the gynecological exams do affect the decision of condom use, or the lack thereof.

KEY RESULTS regarding the use of modern prevention methods for protection against HIV: PrEP:

- Generally, sex workers do have general knowledge regarding PrEP;
- Nevertheless, there is a need for additional workshop training sessions in order to address several issues and/or myths related to the use of PrEP, mainly regarding the side effects, its efficiency, stigma, etc.;
- In terms of the use of PrEP in combination with condoms, sex workers appear to prefer the use of both methods simultaneously, which is fully in accordance with the WHO's recommendations;

- The factors that contribute to the potential use or lack of use of PrEP include the feeling of greater degree of safety when condoms are used, the fear of side effects, the long-term consequences of continual medical therapy, the risk of unplanned pregnancy, as well as the efficiency and pricing;
- The preferred access model to PrEP includes its provision by the civil organizations especially in terms of support, education for its access, the use and following a consistent PrEP regime;
- The potential access to PrEP via the public healthcare system, in particular with transgender sex workers is accompanied by fear of stigma coming from within the community, especially if the access is provided by the Infectious Diseases Clinic and/or stigma by healthcare workers;
- The potential access to PrEP via the primary healthcare system (General Practitioners, Family Doctors), except in transgender sex workers, is a more acceptable model due to the trust and the relationship developed with the chosen MDs;
- The potential access to PrEP via pharmacies is also a preferred model mostly due to the geographical accessibility of pharmacies;
- The price of PrEP is a key factor when it comes to the choice and consistent use of this HIV prevention model, and a price between 1,000 and 1,800 MKD monthly is defined as the most accessible price among the majority of sex workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- To develop additional strategies for HIV infection prevention, the likes of which include the introduction of PrEP;
- To develop additional strategies for sex workers' capacity building in relation to negotiations for condom use with clients and partners;
- To improve the accessibility of free condoms in late night hours;
- To strengthen the civil organizations' capacities pertaining to PrEP;
- To organize educational training sessions for sex workers on the subject of PrEP;
- To develop strategies in terms of support and regular use of PrEP;
- To develop a strategy in order to define the role of civil organizations in the process of provision of support and education regarding the access, use and the consistent PrEP regime;
- To develop activities for healthcare workers' sensitization, especially for those who are going to be involved in the application of this preventative measure;
- To have into consideration the fact that the access to PrEP in terms of its price (the most accessible one ranges between 1,000 and 1,800 MKD per month) in order to secure adequate range and consistent use of this HIV prevention method;
- To develop a PrEP access strategy that would involve healthcare professionals and institutions (General Practitioners/Family Doctors, the Infectious Diseases Clinic, pharmacies) in collaboration with civil organizations, in order to secure access to PrEP which is going to be stigma and discrimination free, as well as geographically and financially available for sex workers in the Republic of North Macedonia