

RECOMMENDATION PAPER

REDUCING GENDER BARRIERS AMONG TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN THE NATIONAL HIV PROGRAMS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transgender people in the Republic of North Macedonia are frequently faced with difficult access to healthcare services, mostly due to stigma and discrimination, which in turn negatively affects their general health and additionally puts them at an increased risk of HIV. For many transgender individuals, the first access point to the healthcare system is the sexual and reproductive health services provided by civil society organizations; however, even in this case the access for transgender people is rather limited. Namely, none of these services includes other sexual and reproductive health services which are of essential importance for transgender people's overall health.

The irresponsible decisions and policies regarding HIV in the Republic of North Macedonia in the last several years, not only increases the risk of HIV and its incidence (newly diagnosed cases) amongst key populations, but it also increases the load on public healthcare institutions. Even the slightest increase in the number of newly diagnosed HIV cases results in steep rise in the cost for treatment and care, which points to the need for appropriate investment, planning and programming in prevention programs. The effects of this arbitrary institutional approach towards HIV prevention in the last years have become evident by the detection of the first HIV cases in transgender people according to the available data in the Public Healthcare Institute about the situation with HIV in the Republic of North Macedonia.

This is a direct result of their exclusion and not being recognized in the national HIV policies, strategies and programs as a key population, and the lack of transgender-specific interventions additionally broadens the gender gap in the HIV prevention. Currently, transgender people utilize the programs and interventions designed for other key populations, which do not always align with transgender people's needs.

This can also be easily observed in the annual HIV programs, such as the national strategies in which transgender people are only sporadically mentioned, but specific measures designed for this population are overlooked. Additionally, the systemic invisibility of

transgender people in these programs is apparent in the annual reports on the conducted activities in accordance with the protection of the population from HIV/AIDS programs published by the Public Health Institute, in which there is no segregated data on transgender people in the scope of the prevention activities.

The circumstances regarding the access to HIV services for transgender people are alarming and they need to be addressed seriously by all relevant and accountable stakeholders. It is of particular importance to take appropriate measures and interventions to reduce the risk of HIV among this vulnerable and marginalized category.

KEY POPULATIONS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE ACCESS TO HIV SERVICES

In the community research conducted during the period between July and September 2023, a total of 25 individuals from key populations took part (5 sex workers, 5 transgender people, 5 men who have sex with men, 5 individuals who are drug users and 5 individuals living with HIV). The vast majority of the participants were from Skopje, while an insignificant portion was from other cities, and the age ranged from 26 to 60. 44% of the participants identify themselves as men, 36% as women and 20% as transgender. The majority of the participants were with Macedonian ethnic background (86%), whereas the remaining small portion identified themselves as members of the Roma, Albanian and Croatian ethnicity.

There is a great sense of awareness among the respondents regarding HIV services, that is 96% have already done an HIV test and roughly half of them have done so within last year. People from key populations most frequently utilize the HIV services offered by the civil society organizations (87.5%), and a very small number of them seek such services in public and private healthcare institutions. This research reaffirmed the fact that people from key populations have the greatest trust in civil society organizations when it comes to HIV services, and the access to these services received the highest ranking in over 70% of them.

TRANSGENDER PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS, NEEDS AND PRIORITIES IN THE ACCESS TO HIV SERVICES

One of the most significant conclusions drawn from this research is the perceptions of people from key populations regarding the access to HIV services for transgender people. 68% of the respondents believe that transgender people have lesser or limited access to HIV services and consider it necessary to intensify the efforts to cover this community with prevention services. Considering the fact that HIV is a concentrated epidemic among men who have sex with men, almost a half of the respondents (44%), also observe that this population has lesser or limited access to HIV services.

As key problems for transgender people in relation to the availability of HIV services, the respondents single out stigma and discrimination, the low trust in healthcare institutions, the lack of education of healthcare personnel in public healthcare regarding transgender people's needs, as well as the small number of civil society organizations that work with this target group. In addition, it can be concluded that the stigma, low aware-

ness and non-acceptance that exist around transgender people among the general population, are oftentimes reflected in the behavior and treatment of healthcare workers, which results in transgender people facing problems in the access to healthcare services. Moreover, the legal recognition of gender is also an issue which respondents singled out, that is the ability to align personal identification documents would allow transgender people to access healthcare and HIV services more easily.

The key priorities regarding HIV services vary depending on the needs of each key population, but to the greatest extent the respondents from all key populations believe that transgender people should be recognized as a separate key population for which special and appropriate HIV prevention services should be provided. The education and sensitization of healthcare personnel regarding their specific problems and needs and the availability of healthcare services without stigma and discrimination are of particular importance for all key populations. Confidentiality and privacy are also key factors in the access to HIV and SRH services, irrespective of where those services are received.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON REDUCING GENDER BARRIERS AMONG TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN THE NATIONAL HIV PROGRAMS

· To recognize and include transgender people as a key population in the national HIV programs and strategies with appropriately programmed and budgeted interventions, in accordance with the specific needs of transgender people.

· To include transgender people as service providers in the HIV prevention services and other sexual and reproductive health services.

· To educate and sensitize healthcare workers from public and private healthcare pertaining to the needs of all key populations, especially those of the transgender community.

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