

HIV Prevalence, AIDS Knowledge and Sexual Behavior among Female Migrant Sex Workers in Palermo, Italy.

By

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

In Italy, the number of non-nationals has increased progressively during the last 10 years. At the end of 2000, there were 1,388,153 non-nationals with legal residence, representing 2.4% of the country's total population and constituting a 77.7% increase since approximately 1990¹. Immigrants in Italy come from many different areas, but mainly from Less Developed Countries (LDCs). There has been a steady increase of female migrants over the last five decades. According to the UNPD data, the stock of female migrants has actually grown faster than the stock of male migrants in the most important receiving countries, industrialized as well as developing. According to the ILO, women now constitute more than half of the migration population worldwide and between 70 and 80 per cent of the migration population in some countries². This migratory movement, either coerced or consented, is characterized by the increase in the percentage of women who migrate. The world-wide trend of feminisation of poverty strongly affects the so-called "feminisation of migration". It must be recognized that migrant women, as a result of the lack of opportunities in their own countries, have come to integrate into the labour market: to offer something and to receive something in return. For this reason, this migratory movement is characterized as labour migration of women³. Migrant women who work in prostitution in Western Europe are no exception. By the second half of the 1990's, European health services were reporting increasing numbers of non-European sex workers in the local sex workforce. They often came from regions of the world with higher risks and rates of STI and HIV. However, only a few studies have found higher risks of HIV and STI in migrant sex workers⁴, and most have not^{5,6,7,8}. With this backdrop, this study examines the HIV prevalence, knowledge of AIDS and sexual behavior among female migrant sex workers in Palermo, Italy.

Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- To know the prevalence of AIDS among female migrant sex workers (FMSWs),
- To examine FMSWs knowledge on HIV/AIDS and STIS,
- To investigate FMSWs working conditions (that is, types and social contexts of sex work, principal mode of soliciting clients and type of sexual services provided),
- To know FMSWs' bargaining power, condom use, drug use and sexual networks,
- To generate data base which may enable policy makers assist in improving the reproductive health and rights of FMSWs.

For the purpose of this study a female migrant sex worker is any woman who, not being a national of Italy, enters Italy, for whatever purpose, by whatever means, with or without assistance, and who at any stage of their residence in Italy, engages in sex work.

Method of data collection

The study was cross-sectional and descriptive, using both quantitative and qualitative method of data collection. The target population for the study consisted of all female migrant sex workers in Palermo, Italy. This study was conducted between May-August 2008. A convenience sample of 123 female migrant sex workers were interviewed successfully using an interviewer administered structured questionnaire developed by the author which contained mostly closed ended questions. Content validity was done by a panel of judges from The Association “Pellegrino Della Terra Onlus (The Pilgrim of the Earth)” (PEDETO)*. The questions in the questionnaire were objectively vetted, paying particular attention to their relevance to the subject matter and their coverage of the entire topic of study.

*The Association “Pellegrino Della Terra Onlus (The Pilgrim of the Earth)” (PEDETO) is a Non-governmental organization that began in 1996, in response to a significant increase in trafficking of Africans for sex work in Palermo, Italy. With support from Associazione Buon Pastore Onlus, funded by Tavola Valdese (Waldensian Church Italy) and Methodist Church England, the Association is involved in rehabilitative projects and HIV/AIDS intervention projects especially in the area of access to health care in diagnosis, treatment and preventive services among African migrants. www.pellegrinodellaterra.it

Questionnaire was edited to include suggestions given by the panel of judges. Main areas covered in the questionnaire were the socio- demographic data, knowledge on HIV/AIDS and STIS, working conditions (that is, types and social contexts of sex work, principal mode of soliciting clients and type of sexual services provided), bargaining power, condom use, drug use and sexual networks. HIV cases reported to the Association PEDETO was used to estimate the percentage of HIV positive FMSWs. For the qualitative phase, individual in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted among key informants. Written consent for the study was obtained from the Association. The purpose of the study was explained to respondents and participation was made voluntary. The data collected were subjected to basic analysis with the STATISTICA software version 8. For univariate analysis, frequencies and medians of all variables and measures were produced. Bivariate associations between individual socio-demographic variables and condom use was examined using the χ^2 test with $p < 0.001$. Information from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were transcribed and organized under broad headings that depict different aspects of the discussions. The transcribed information were analyzed descriptively (qualitatively) and used to corroborate results of quantitative analysis where and when necessary.

Major findings

The overall HIV prevalence was 8%, with large differences in rates in people from different countries. However, the work conditions are not favorable for the consistent use of condoms since sex work is highly stigmatized and prohibited in Palermo, Italy and 22% of the female migrant sex workers were undocumented. More than half of FMSWs are street or freelance sex workers while three quarter work for economic gain. Number of clients that almost half (46 %) of FMSW sees during a typical working day is between 10 – 15. 82% of sexual acts performed by FMSWs were peno-vaginal. Oral sex were often practised as a pre- penetration stimulant but when demanded fully by clients, it attracts additional

charges. The prohibition of sex work has severe consequences for their living and working conditions which leads to exploitation through unprotected and unsafe working conditions. Earnings are highly variable. The street or freelance FMSWs are the least paid but they deal with the maximum number of clients.

Conclusion/recommendation

This study showed some barriers for safer sex practices among FMSWs. The active participation of sex workers in promoting safe sex practices that will lessen the spread of HIV/AIDS is essential. Reviewing existing policies, consistently building consensus among all stakeholders on the nature, content and extent of sexual and reproductive health and rights services for FMSWs is recommended.

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