

SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH ON HIV/AIDS AMONG COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS IN PORTUGAL

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Background

- Portugal has one of the highest HIV prevalence in Europe. There is no specific data concerning hard to reach populations, such as CSW.
- A study, is being conducted to determine the knowledge, attitudes and practices of CSW. A questionnaire was conceived taking into consideration the UNGASS and ECDC indicators as well as inputs from the NGOs and former CSWs. Concurrent to the behavioral survey, a rapid HIV test is being performed.
- A participatory approach has been used as NGOs, CSWs, and other key people from the civil society have actively participated in all phases of the project, including the questionnaire design & and data collection and will also be involved later in the planning and implementation of specific interventions that will arise from the results.
- To enrich data collection a mapping of NGOs was performed.

Methods

This project has two components:

- The first component of the project aims to determine the knowledge, attitudes, practices, and access to health services of the population under study as well as identifying the determinants of social and behavioral factors associated with HIV. Respondents were recruited by Snowball Sampling, and through nearby structures using social networks.
- The second component aims to identify and develop *interventions* that address the needs previously identified in the first phase. The activities will be focused on peer education and capacity building. It is expected that the *intervention* will occur in NGOs working with groups and informal socialization networks within these groups.
- Active participation and empowerment are the guiding principles of the project and are listed and highlighted throughout the entire project.

Expected Results

- This study will help to increase knowledge that sustains the development of specific interventions in the area of HIV. The increased knowledge will enable the design, planning and implementation of new measures of intervention, and optimization of the existing ones.
- It will also provide NGOs working in this area with information that will redirect their programs and interventions with a view to obtaining more effective results with respect to reducing the spread of HIV.
- The results will also be used in the future for comparative purposes with other studies, both nationally and internationally, allowing Portugal to have reliable information that can be sent to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and UNAIDS, as well as other entities.
- Interventions should result in a positive impact in terms of changing behavior and attitudes of CWS in order to reduce their vulnerability.

Lessons Learned / Next Steps

- A positive aspect is that a considered amount of interviews were performed by organizations already working with CSW and therefore already have some trust established which will allow the future's success of the interventions in the area of prevention.
- With the findings, it is expected that an intervention plan promoting capacity building and peer education will help guarantee the project feasibility. This will increase the probability of negotiating safe sex between this group and their clients. On the other hand it is important to link the results obtained from the survey to a new intervention program for the empowerment of CSW through peers.
- The results will allow for the monitoring the situation of CWS in Portugal, by conducting similar surveys in upcoming years. Furthermore it will permit the comparison of compare the main indicators with other European countries.