



Asylum-seeking women: violence and sexual health services in the host country

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Background

There is limited evidence available on asylum-seeking women and their experiences of sexual and other forms of violence, including partner abuse or child sexual abuse, which may have occurred in their home country, while in transit or the host country. This study explored violence among asylum-seeking women and their use of STI, HIV and other health services in their host countries, Scotland and Belgium.

Methods

Two small-scale parallel studies were conducted with women accessing services of the Scottish Refugee Council, Glasgow and women at three refugee reception centres in Belgium. In Scotland, all women above the age of 18 years registered with the Scottish Induction Service were sampled between June 2006 and January 2007. A total of 347 women were contacted, 51 responded and 46 completed the interview. Interviews were completed with a convenience sample of 98 women attending the refugee reception centres in Belgium.

Results

Women in both Belgium and Scotland reported high lifetime levels of any form of violence (77%, 70%) and sexual violence (45%, 48%). Most violence occurred in women's home country, but abuse was also reported during transit and in the host country. STI testing was received by 28% of women in Belgium and 33% of women in Scotland while in the host country. 48% of women in Belgium and 38% of women in Scotland reported ever having an HIV test. Of the women in Belgium who reported any violence, 27% received testing for STIs since arrival and 50% were ever tested for HIV and in Scotland, 50% said they had received testing for STIs and 70% for HIV.

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Violence	Belgium		Scotland	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Any violence, <i>physical, sexual or child sexual abuse</i> *	65	77%	30	70%
Any sexual violence, <i>adult or child sexual abuse</i> #	33	45%	20	48%
Home country, any violence	58	59%	23	50%
Transit location, any violence	7	7%	4	9%
Host country, any violence	11	11%	8	17%

*14 missing for Belgium and 3 for Scotland; #25 missing for Belgium and 4 missing for Scotland

STI and HIV testing*	Belgium		Scotland	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
No STI test in host country*	50	54%	25	56%
Did not know if tested*	17	18%	5	11%
Wants future STI test**	53	62%	22	54%
No HIV test, ever#	32	39%	23	55%
Did not know#	11	13%	3	7%
Wants future HIV test**	53	62%	22	54%

* Among women reporting ever having sex

** 2 missing for Belgium; ** 1 missing for Belgium and 1 missing for Scotland; #4 missing for Belgium;

Conclusions

Asylum-seeking women are extremely likely to have experienced various forms of violence, including sexual violence. Yet, many women who have been sexually abused are not receiving basic sexual health care responses, such as STI and HIV testing. Programs for asylum-seekers must recognize women's high vulnerability to violence and provide information about sexual and other health risks and culturally-appropriate services.