

Prevalence of STI Symptoms and Access to Healthcare Among Female Sex Workers in Rwanda: Findings from the IBBSS 2023

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General

Category: B9: Clinical issues specific to key populations

Country of research: Rwanda

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Abstract Text (max 350 words)

Background: Female sex workers (FSWs) in Rwanda face a significant burden of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which increases their vulnerability to adverse health outcomes. This study, part of the Integrated Bio-Behavioral Surveillance Survey (IBBSS) 2023, aimed to assess the prevalence of STI symptoms and healthcare-seeking behaviors among FSWs in Rwanda.

Methods: The IBBSS 2023 was a cross-sectional study involving 2,541 FSWs aged 15 years and above. Data on STI symptoms within the past 12 months and associated healthcare-seeking behaviors were collected through structured interviews. Prevalence estimates were calculated with 95% confidence intervals (CIs), and the data were disaggregated by symptom type and healthcare access.

Results: Overall, 60.4% (95% CI: 56.8–63.8) of FSWs reported experiencing STI symptoms in the 12 months preceding the survey. Among them, 32.3% reported having an ulcer or sore and 40.3% experienced abnormal vaginal discharge. Among those who reported ulcers or sores, only 69.9% (95% CI: 64.0–75.3) sought healthcare services, highlighting barriers to healthcare access. Additionally, 12.1% (95% CI: 10.0–14.6) reported noticing ulcers or sores on their partners during the same period. Despite the high prevalence of STI symptoms, significant gaps remain in healthcare utilization. Approximately 30.1% (95% CI: 24.7–36.0) of FSWs who experienced ulcers or sores did not seek care, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions.

Conclusions: The high prevalence of STI symptoms and suboptimal healthcare-seeking behaviors among FSWs in Rwanda indicate critical gaps in STI prevention, access to and condom use and other care services. Interventions should focus on improving access to affordable, stigma-free healthcare, increasing awareness of STI symptoms and addressing barriers to healthcare-seeking behaviors. These efforts are essential to mitigate the STI burden and enhance overall health outcomes for FSWs in Rwanda. Further research should explore the underlying reasons for limited healthcare access and develop evidence-based strategies to improve STI management among this vulnerable population.

Additional questions

Ethical research declaration: Yes

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