

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

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1,3,7: Rwanda Network of People Living with HIV / AIDS (RRP+)

2: Rwanda Biomedical Center (RBC)

4: United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

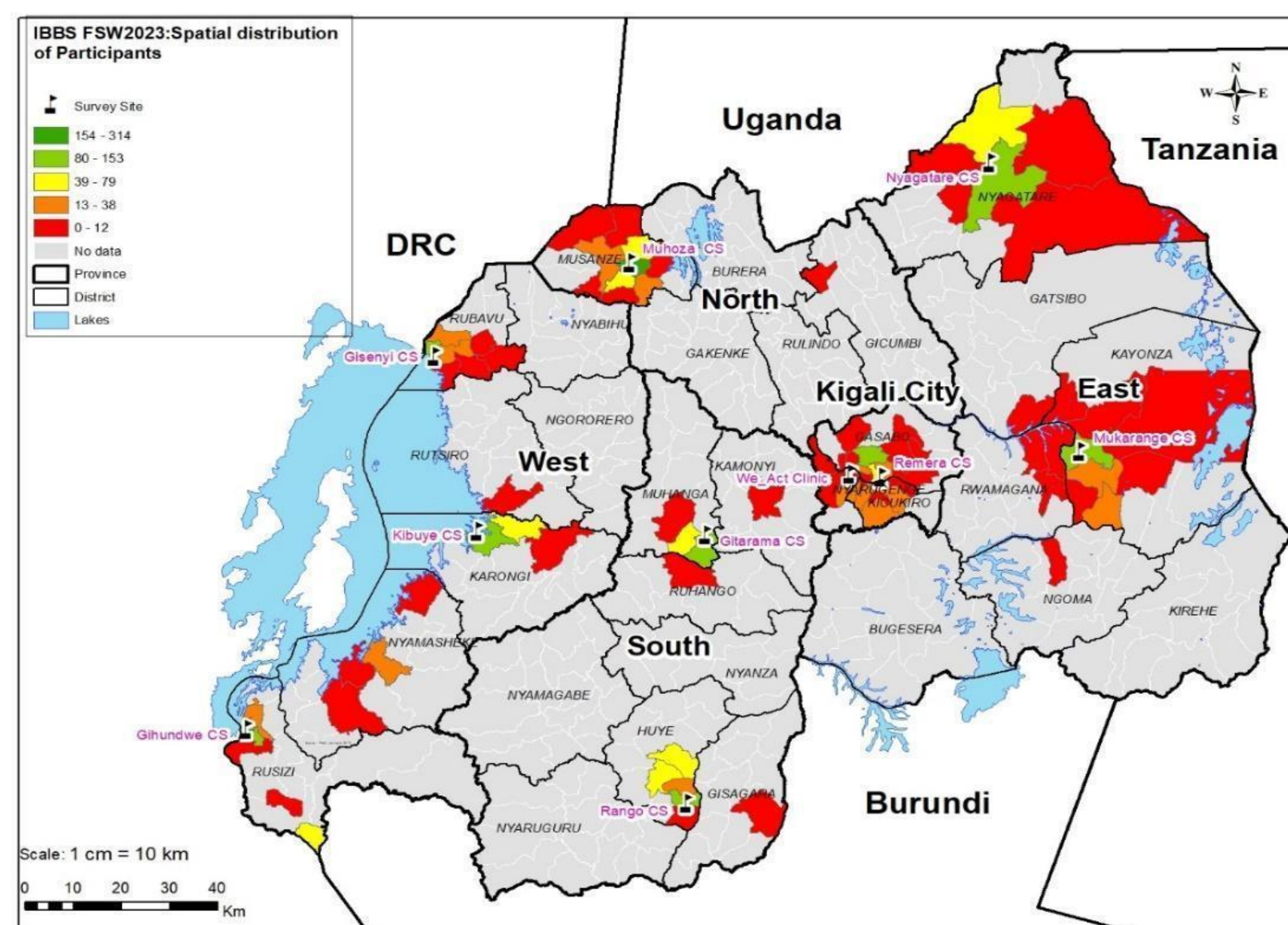
5: World Health Organization (WHO)

6: Centre for Impact, Innovation and Capacity Building for Health Information Systems and Nutrition (CIIC-HIN)

Background

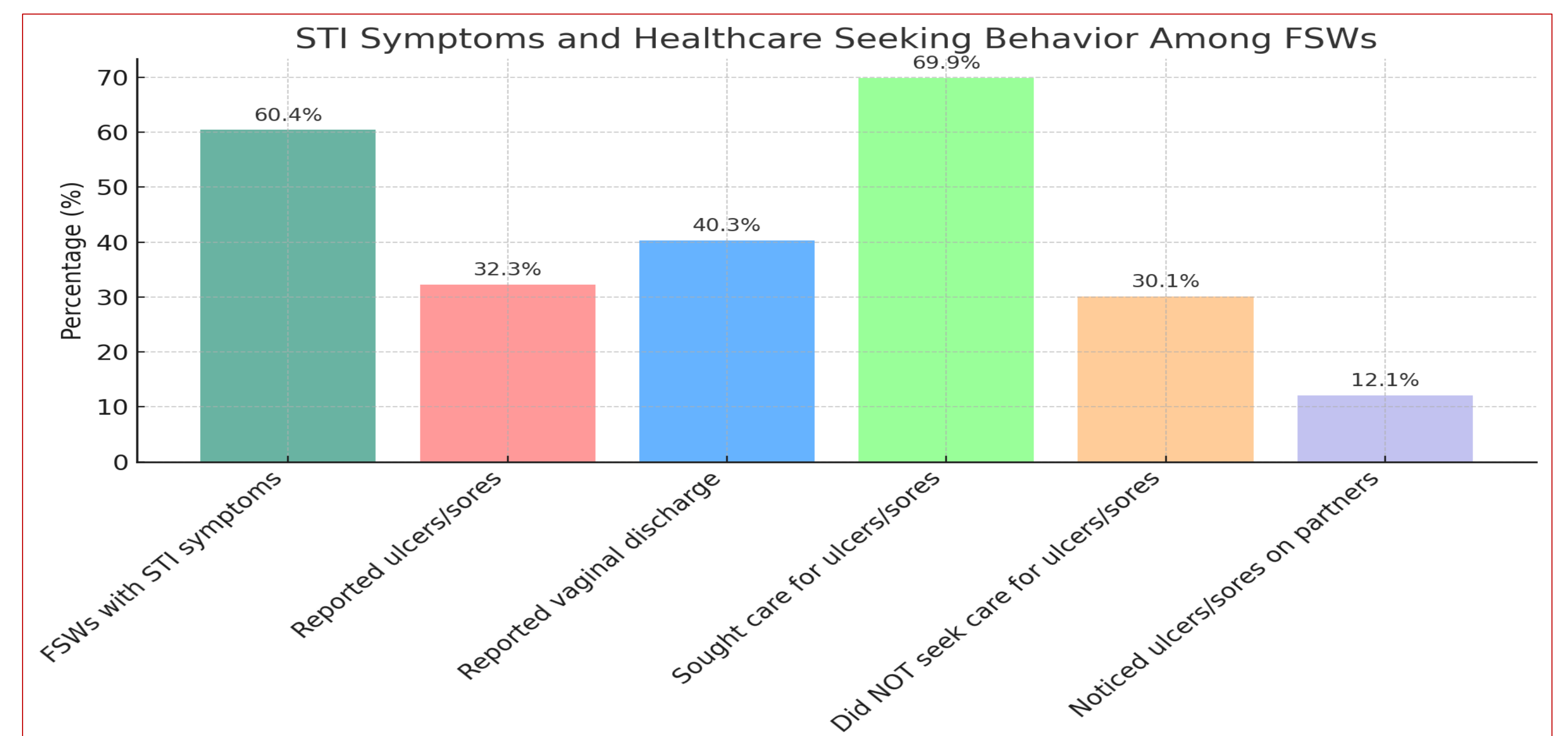
Female sex workers (FSWs) in Rwanda are at high risk of HIV infection. Rwanda Biomedical Center (RBC) and its partners conducted an Integrated Bio-Behavioral Surveillance Survey (IBSS) from May to June 2023, aimed to assess the prevalence of STI symptoms and healthcare-seeking behaviors among FSWs in Rwanda.

Method



The IBSS 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 identifying the root causes preventing FSWs from accessing services and for targeted interventions addressing those factors.

Conclusion

The high prevalence of STI symptoms and suboptimal healthcare-seeking behaviors among FSWs in Rwanda indicates 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.