

SUMMARY

The leaflet presents key findings of a social survey aimed at identifying the actual factors preventing sex workers (SWs) from accessing HIV and other critical services, and assessing their quality from the perspective of SWs themselves. The survey was initiated and conducted in 2017 by the “All-Ukrainian Charitable Organization “Legalife-Ukraine”” in concert with the Analytical Center “Socioconsulting” under the grant support from AFEW International.

This survey is an operational qualitative social survey. Three methods of data collection were used for it: semi-structured interviews with SWs (in total, 175), in-depth interviews with experts, including NGO staff, specialists in infections of the AIDS centers, and SW “managers” (pimps, madames) (in total, 14), as well as three focus-group discussions with SWs. Data were collected in the following cities: Kyiv, KryvyiRih, Vinnytsia, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Zhytomyr, Kropyvnytskyi, Donetsk and adjacent areas.

Comparative analysis of the data received helped to make a number of conclusions. Many SWs are pretty vulnerable physically, emotionally and economically. Such problems as loneliness, lack of support, including financial one, from the husband/partner, in particular, for raising children, are very common for them. The wellbeing of many respondents directly depends on their involvement in sex business.

Many SWs are concerned about three things: lack of funds, including debts (76%), fear of HIV/STI/Hepatitis infection (73%), emotional condition (58%). At the same time, among services provided to this key population by NGOs, there are practically no services aimed at improving the emotional condition of SWs, no training in knowledge and skills that would enable them to have additional sources of income, to change occupation or manage their resources more efficiently.

On the one hand, the survey findings revealed the recent positive trend towards more regular use of condoms during the provision of sex services. However, risky behaviors (unprotected sex, especially oral one, substance use together with the client before or during the provision of sex services) are still quite common.

The findings of the survey confirmed that the violence remained a key risk factor in sex business. More than 80% of respondents indicated that during the past year they had experienced at least one of the types of violence included in the survey.

The fact that the national police did not protect civil rights of SWs was also confirmed. In fact, it is one of the sources of violence against SWs (including economic and emotional violence). The national police have a low level of trust, so the SWs do not seek help from law enforcement agencies.

The effective legal regulation of sex work in Ukraine affects the efficient prevention of HIV/STI/Hepatitis in the population, offers ample opportunities for abuse and increases the vulnerability of SWs to violence, blackmail or extortion.

An important trend in the work of HIV servicing and human rights organizations should become the decriminalization of sex work in the country by amending the legislation of Ukraine. Such advocacy initiatives will help to remove barriers in the protection of civil rights of SWs, improve the efficiency of combat against violence, human trafficking, and involvement of minors in sex work. Decriminalization of sex work is an important step towards expanding the coverage of SWs and their clients with quality HIV services and curbing the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ukraine.

The findings of the survey prove that SWs face a number of challenges when trying to access health services, including both primary health care (PHC centers or outpatient facilities) and specialized health care (HCT, ART, STI, substance use treatment):

- 14% of respondents have never been tested for HIV;
- 20% of respondents (35) live with HIV but many of them (30) do not take ART;
- Among SWs who use drugs, 58% (33) do not receive OST.

The survey findings show that the SWs have needs that are not met by either public agencies or NGOs. These needs include: health care, psychological and legal support, as well as temporary crisis shelters (for example, in case of violence), doctors' consultations, legal assistance, and temporary child care.

Based on these findings, recommendations were developed for NGOs and other stakeholders on how to improve the HIV response taking into account specific needs and interests of sex workers, and on how to protect the civil rights of this key population.