



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women

**Exploring the Dynamics and Vulnerabilities of HIV
Transmission Amongst Sex Workers in the
Palestinian Context**



The Palestinian National AIDS committee

A UN Women operational research
occupied Palestinian territory

2011

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The research takes part within a common global research agenda on "Knowing The Epidemics". It will inform the work of the Palestinian Authority National AIDS Committee.

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The field research team was composed of four local field researchers (2 women and 2 men) and one field researcher coordinator with educational and professional backgrounds in the social sciences. The team completed the data collection over a period of three months, from March to June 2010.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this operational research are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of UN Women, the GFATM, the Palestinian Authority, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

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List of Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
GFATM	Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
NAC	(Palestinian) National AIDS Committee
NIS	New Israeli Shekel
NGO	non-governmental organization
oPt	occupied Palestinian territory
PA	Palestinian Authority
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
STI	sexually transmitted infection
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGASS	United Nations General Assembly Special Session
UNGIFT	United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNSCO	United Nations Special Coordinator Office for the Middle East Peace Process
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive Summary

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), within the framework the joint UN programme "Scaling up universal access to prevention, treatment and care of HIV/AIDS in the occupied Palestinian territory," and financed through the Global Fund for HIV, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM), undertook operational research to explore the dynamics of sex work and its associated vulnerabilities to HIV/AIDS in the Palestinian context.

This research investigates the factors that drive women into both elective and forced sex work and their varying vulnerabilities in acquiring HIV/AIDS. A rapid assessment methodology was utilized to obtain a formative look into these issues and to address the knowledge gap that exists on sex work and HIV vulnerability in the Palestinian context. Surveys were conducted with women who had entered sex work both voluntarily and forcibly, as well as with clients who had sought to purchase sexual services, and other key informants ranging from social workers to medical personnel and law enforcement officials. In addition, focus groups discussions with university students, both male and female, were also conducted.

While the operational research focused on the governorates of Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem within the oPt, some data was also collected from additional governorates. In total, 243 respondents participated in the operational research: 28 sex workers, 63 key informants, 64 clients, and 88 university students. The assessment was conducted through a snowball sampling technique.

The following is a list of key findings from the assessment:

- Whereas the organization of sex workers in other country contexts has yielded some positive results related to HIV prevention through the promotion of condom use, the nuances of forced sex work in the oPt may necessitate a more in-depth look at how to address sexual violence and abuse as a means of HIV prevention.
- 35.7 percent of the women sex workers surveyed for this research reported that they were engaged in elective sex work, while 64.3 percent reported that they were forcibly engaged in sex work.
- Women sex worker respondents reported a high rate of previous physical violence; 96.3 percent indicated that they had been victims of violence, of which, over half cited a husband or father as the perpetrator of physical violence.
- Women sex worker respondents also reported a relatively high rate of previous sexual violence, with 76 percent of them reporting to have been victims of sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner or family member.
- 74 percent of the women sex worker respondents involved in the research did not complete their formal education; 93 percent of those who did not complete school cited their family as the reason for dropping out.

- 60 percent of the women sex workers surveyed reported to be aware of HIV, while 39 percent indicated that they had no familiarity with the subject. As for men purchasing sexual services, 98.4 percent of those surveyed in the research reported to be aware of HIV, while only 1.6 percent indicated that they had no familiarity with the subject.
- Fear of scandals, tradition/religion, and a lack of adequate information were all listed by survey respondents as primary limitations to HIV awareness.
- Both clients and women sex workers were asked about their perceived vulnerability to HIV. Among the clients surveyed, 81.2 percent did not consider themselves to be vulnerable to HIV, while 18.8 percent believed themselves to be vulnerable. Among the women sex workers surveyed, only 18 percent believed that they were vulnerable to HIV.
- When asked how often clients used condoms during sexual intercourse, 64 percent of the women sex workers surveyed reported that their clients never use condoms. Those who reported that they did not know whether their clients used condoms stated that they were often under the influence of drugs and therefore could not recall. Reasons provided for not using condoms included client preference, the objection of madams¹, lack of money, infertility, and simply that it was not considered.
- When asked how often they use condoms when having sexual intercourse with a sex worker, 37.5 percent of the clients surveyed stated “always”; 11 percent stated “often”; 37.5 percent stated “sometimes”; and 14 percent stated “never”. The relatively higher percentage of men who stated that they always wear condoms could be a reflection of some social desirability bias, whereby respondents provide answers that are considered more socially acceptable.
- Of those clients that reported not to use condoms during sexual intercourse, the primary reason given for not using a condom was a reduction in pleasure.
- Across all survey data, there was a low level of knowledge on where an individual can obtain an HIV test. While 28 percent of the male clients interviewed reported that they had been tested for HIV, only 12 percent reported that they knew where they could receive a confidential HIV test in their own community. This suggests that certain males are going outside of their own communities to seek confidential testing.
- Among the women sex workers surveyed, only 18.5 percent reported that they had been tested for HIV, while the remaining 81.5 percent reported that they had never been tested.

¹ A woman who is in charge of a group of sex workers who live or work in the same house, Cambridge dictionary.

- Stigma related to HIV is prevalent and when key informants, primarily service providers within their community, were asked whether or not they would like to keep it secret if a member of their family contracted HIV, 71.4 percent stated that they would.

The following is a sample of key recommendations based on the assessment. These recommendations are provided in further detail in Chapter 10:

- Strengthen the national HIV and AIDS policy in the oPt.
- Create and ensure access to confidential HIV testing services within the oPt.
- Implement programmes that empower women to make decisions related to sexual and reproductive health. Educational materials on HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) should be readily available to both men and women regardless of marital status. Efforts should be made to provide educational materials to both urban and rural areas and to bridge socio-economic divides.
- Develop a school curriculum that addresses gender-based violence, women's human rights, and sexual and reproductive health, including HIV and STIs.
- Make use of media outlets as means of sensitization about HIV to reduce stigma and dispel clichés around the issue through sharing stories and testimonies of people who contracted HIV.
- Strengthen national efforts to integrate women into the formal labour force, ensuring equal access to assets and promoting skills training for women in non-traditional areas to ensure that women have the opportunity to enter innovative and expanding sectors.
- Develop a comprehensive national action plan addressing gender-based violence and tackling physical and sexual violence, forced prostitution and human trafficking.
- Train police forces to identify and assist victims of gender-based violence, including victims of forced prostitution and human trafficking.
- Until the new unified Palestinian Penal Code is enacted, use the provisions on forced prostitution contained in the Jordanian Penal Code (Articles 310-318), currently enforced in the West Bank, as a means of protecting women against forced

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