

Title: Gender aspect of interplay between drug use and sexual transmission within the Leningrad Region of the Russian

Background: Eastern Europe currently has the fastest expanding rate of HIV in the world, with Russia at the forefront of the epidemic. While the Russian epidemic largely began amongst drug using populations, recent years have shown an increase of HIV transmission through sexual transmission and an increase of HIV infection among women. It is estimated that 50 percent of HIV+ women in the region acquired HIV through a drug-using partner.

Description: During 2013, a community-based, HIV rapid-testing initiative tested 4702 individuals, who have experience using injection drugs, in the Leningrad Region, and found an 11.44% HIV seropositivity rate. This is 20 times higher than the state model of HIV testing. Women comprised only 35% of the testing population. A questionnaire completed by all participants prior to testing revealed several important facts regarding the gender dimensions of the HIV epidemic in Russia. From among all individuals tested, men and women showed a similar level of knowledge regarding HIV risk factors. 36.48% of men understood key HIV risk factors and 32.85% of women. The same questionnaire revealed that 26.29% of women used a condom during their most recent sexual contact, while 36.48% of men used a condom. This divide increased among those individuals who tested positive for HIV, with 41.96% reporting condom use and 55.79% of men. This statistic coincides with further data showing that more women reported having a constant sexual partner during the last year, at 73.71%, than men, at 65.30%.

Lessons Learned: From among all women IDUs participating in the community-based rapid-HIV testing initiative, a disproportionate amount did not adhere to safe sex practices, despite having a similar level of knowledge about HIV risk-factors to men. These statistics convey gender-based risk behaviors that put women at greater risk for HIV.

Conclusions/Next Steps: In order to address the feminization of the HIV epidemic in Russia, there is a need to research the sexual behaviors of women who have experience using drugs and who have sexual contact with drug users. From this research, gender-based advocacy and outreach needs to be implemented.