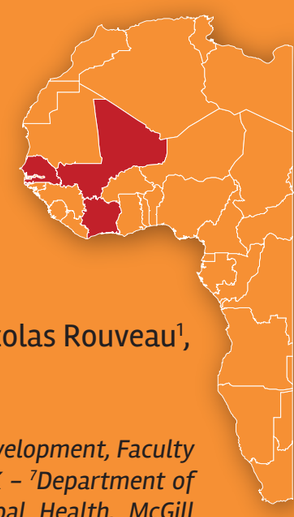
Reaching key and peripheral populations: a phone-based survey of HIV self-test users in West Africa



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BACKGROUND

In West Africa, community-based strategies focussing on key populations (KP) such as female sex workers (FSW) and men having sex with men (MSM) have significantly improved access to HIV testing for KP. However, some of them (like "occasional FSW" or "hidden MSM") remain difficult to reach, as well as their sexual partners and clients.

HIV self-testing (HIVST) kits can be distributed to primary contacts for personal use and through secondary distribution, where contacts are invited to redistribute kits to their peers, partners, and relatives.

Since 2019, the ATLAS program implements such a strategy in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Senegal, including FSW-based and MSM-based activities within the communities.

METHODS

To examine the **profiles of actual HIVST** users without actively tracking them, we implemented a **phone-based survey**.

Between March and June 2021, leaflets were distributed in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal with the HIV test kits, inviting users to call a free phone number anonymously. Participation was rewarded with $3 USD of phone credit.

Each flyer had a **unique participation number** to indirectly identify the Distribution channel (DC), FSW-based or MSM-based.

RESULTS

A total of **2'405 participants** were recruited across countries out of 44'598 HIVST kits distributed (participation rate: 5.4%), 1'305 among the FSW-DC (3.9%) and 1'100 through MSM-DC (9.1%).

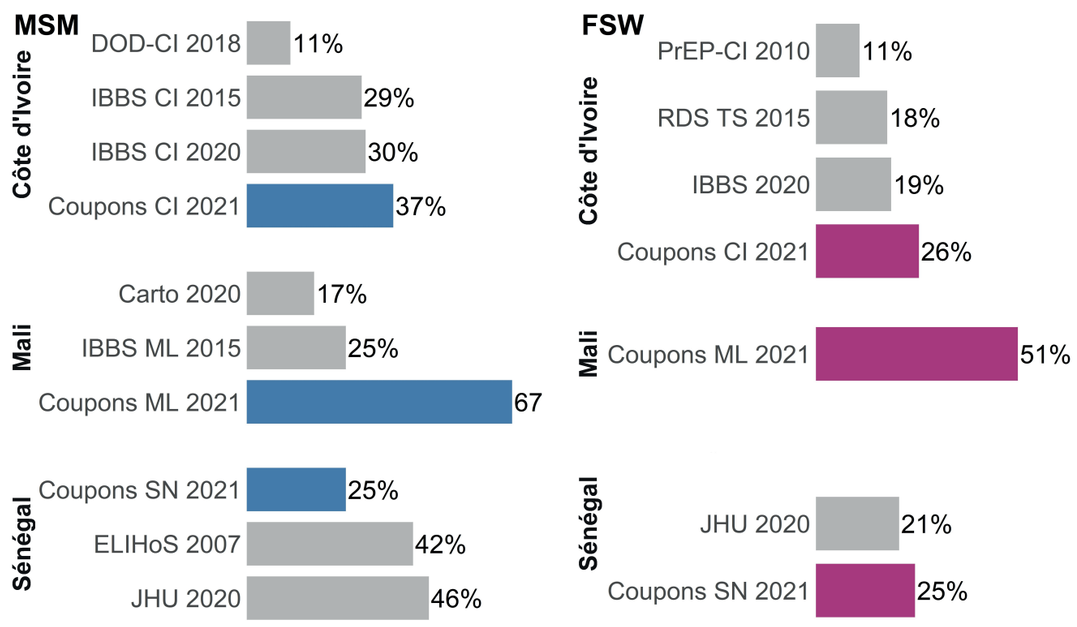
Of participants, 69% received their self-test kit through primary distribution and 31% received it from a friend (17%), sexual partner (7%), relative (6%) or colleague (1%), which illustrates the **feasibility of secondary distribution**.

Half of participants perceived themselves as "not exposed at all" to HIV risk.

In the FSW-DC, 48% of participants were male, and in the MSM-DC 9% were female, showing the **capacity of HIVST to reach sexual partners and clients of KP**.

Only 55% of male participants in the MSM-DC reported to the interviewer that they ever had sex with a man, suggesting that **some "hidden MSM" may have been recruited**.

Proportion of first-time testers in Coupons survey compared with other surveys conducted among MSM and FSW



Similarly, men participants from the MSM-DC and female participants from the FSW-DC are **older and more educated** compared to surveys conducted among MSM and FSW.

CONCLUSION

HIVST offers a complementary testing approach to increase diagnosis coverage among key populations that face barriers to conventional HIV testing strategies.

Secondary distribution of HIVST is feasible and has the potential to reach, beyond key populations, vulnerable peripheral groups.

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