

ACCESSING REPRODUCTIVE HEALTHCARE: CHALLENGES FACED BY UNDOCUMENTED YOUNG ADULTS IN THE NETHERLANDS

HILDE SPAAN

2024

INTRODUCTION

In modern society, 'being undocumented' is central to immigration and migrant rights debates, implying residing illegally in a country. Without legal documentation, individuals risk detention and deportation if stopped by police (de Vries, 2018). This status can stem from factors like illegal immigration, expired visas, or asylum seekers not meeting protection criteria. In the Netherlands, around 35,000 undocumented migrants, primarily from Ghana, Nigeria, Suriname, and Morocco, face constant health pressures due to their generally poorer health compared to residents (Van der Heijden, 2015; De Vito, 2015).

Our research emerged from exploring the healthcare challenges of undocumented individuals, particularly focusing on obstacles young undocumented individuals face in accessing reproductive healthcare due to cultural and societal stigmas. This led to formulating our sub-question: "What cultural and societal stigmas hinder young adults without documentation from accessing sexual reproductive healthcare (SRH)?" This question now guides our further research. The NWA Basic for Resilience consortium aims to understand and mitigate the social exclusion of undocumented youth in the Netherlands (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2022). Through our work, we seek to provide the NWA with insights into the barriers undocumented young adults encounter in accessing reproductive healthcare.

We've chosen to focus on reproductive healthcare because we consider it a

fundamental human right. By studying it among undocumented populations, we aim to advocate for the rights of all individuals regardless of immigration status. Additionally, undocumented individuals often face discrimination and marginalization based on factors like race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Researching reproductive healthcare within this context allows exploration of how these intersecting identities affect healthcare access and experiences. Understanding the cultural and social stigmas impacting access to reproductive healthcare among undocumented individuals can help identify and address health inequalities.

CULTURAL & SOCIAL STIGMAS

Investigating cultural and social stigmas is crucial in understanding how they impact medical help-seeking behaviors. Social stigmas entail negative labels or stereotypes assigned to undocumented individuals in society, potentially creating barriers to accessing essential reproductive healthcare (Samen sterk zonder stigma, n.d). These barriers can leave undocumented individuals vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and pregnancy-related complications.

On the other hand, cultural stigmas encompass negative attitudes, beliefs, or prejudices within a specific culture regarding reproductive healthcare, sexuality, contraception, and abortion (Open University, n.d). These stigmas, rooted in religious,

traditional, or cultural norms, can impede access to reproductive healthcare for undocumented individuals. Additionally, illness is not merely biological but also influenced by cultural beliefs, and perceptions of health and illness evolve over time (Open University, n.d).

Finally, these social and cultural barriers emerge within intersectional layers, as multiple personality traits influence how these social and cultural barriers are experienced differently. For example, men and women may experience sexual taboos, which will be discussed later in this paper, in different ways (Collins, 2015).

METHODS

This literature review used a systematic search to find relevant studies on challenges faced by undocumented young adults in accessing reproductive healthcare. Studies were chosen based on their relevance and contribution to understanding these obstacles. Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed journals, reputable reports, and gray literature. Data from these sources were analyzed to uncover social, cultural, and legal barriers affecting access to reproductive healthcare for undocumented young adults. Findings provided insights for policy and practice recommendations.

Additionally, insights from 5 professional interviews were included, along with stories from documentaries, podcasts, and news reports. A narrative analysis approach was used to interpret qualitative data gathered from these diverse sources

It's worth noting that both primary and secondary sources were utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

RESULTS

Language barrier

A significant social barrier encountered during our research and interviews is the language barrier faced by undocumented individuals in accessing sexual and reproductive health care. This barrier intersects with other forms of marginalization and discrimination they experience, hindering proper care and often prolonging the care process (Froklage, 2008; Mukondwa, 2016). Undocumented individuals express fear of receiving incorrect diagnoses due to language barriers (Mukondwa, 2016). To address this, midwives use various strategies, such as communicating in English or using visual aids like drawings. However, the availability of interpreters is limited and does not cover all languages spoken by these women. Some midwives collaborate with Cultural and Linguistic Mediators to provide additional support in the women's native language (Froklage, 2008).

Other healthcare providers also acknowledge the presence of language barriers when assisting undocumented individuals. One healthcare provider stated: "I notice a bit more tension in the individuals themselves, which is unfortunate due to the language barrier we naturally encounter. We try to build a small conversation, as much as possible, to provide more reassurance and confidence" (Ministry of Health, 2021). Finally, not all healthcare providers attempt to overcome these language barriers. For instance, nearly 20% of general practitioners in Amsterdam refuse to provide care to undocumented individuals primarily due to the language barrier between the doctor and the patient (Linssen, 2022).

An Amsterdam resident, Zaza, said about this: "Because I have been refused so many times, I don't even bother trying to find a general practitioner anymore." (Linssen, 2022).

Knowledge, Education & Access

Multiple studies indicate that undocumented women in the Netherlands often lack knowledge about their access to healthcare. Being undocumented, combined with their educational level, significantly impacts their sexual and reproductive health (SRH). For example, in a study by Marianne Schoevers, a respondent stated not being aware of the possibility to seek medical care, saying, "I was not aware that it was possible for me to go to a doctor."

Another respondent expressed confusion about where to seek care and how the healthcare system is organized (Bloemers, 2010). Similarly, research by Froklage suggests that undocumented individuals often do not realize they are eligible for healthcare services in the Netherlands. Undocumented women frequently lack awareness of their entitlement to medically necessary assistance (Froklage, 2008), believing they must cover the entire cost of healthcare themselves, or can only visit a midwife if something is seriously wrong during pregnancy (Froklage, 2008).

Undocumented individuals, even when knowledgeable about the healthcare system, still encounter difficulties accessing appropriate care. Some general practitioners refuse them due to language barriers, while others struggle to even see the doctor due to barriers imposed by the doctor's assistant. The assistant may reject undocumented individuals, viewing them as a challenging group, and suggesting they seek care elsewhere, such as Doctors of the World or emergency medical centers (Kruispost) (Hochheimer, 2023).

Moreover, the educational level of undocumented youth influences their engagement with sexual and reproductive health services. Regardless of their region or country of origin, their sexual beliefs and behaviors are primarily shaped by their level of education (Alvarez-Nieto, 2015). Those with lower education levels or from lower social classes may exhibit withdrawn or easily influenced behavior, while those with higher education levels are more likely to speak openly about sexuality, seek SRH services earlier, and have a more open relationship with their healthcare providers.

"If they are more aware of the system, they are also more aware of how healthcare works"

During an interview with Tara Fiorito, we gained valuable insights into the importance of education among undocumented individuals. We discussed the pilot program that provides undocumented individuals with access to higher education. During this conversation, we focused on the changes that occur when undocumented individuals gain access to higher education. Tara emphasized that if they become more connected to the institutional system, they are likely to become more aware of the different facilities, including healthcare. As a result, certain experiences within the community have led undocumented youth to come together and share their experiences in a relatively safe space. They have started to trust that there are Dutch people and organizations working for them.

These changes could potentially lead to undocumented individuals gaining more knowledge and sharing experiences about reproductive healthcare. Access to quality education could therefore contribute to the understanding that undocumented individuals have about reproductive healthcare in the Netherlands.

Tara wouldn't claim that the pilot has been effective specifically for reproductive rights, but there are undocumented organizations advocating for access to healthcare. So there are developments happening in that regard.

Sexual Taboos

Sexual taboos significantly impact the willingness of undocumented individuals to seek reproductive healthcare. Cultural norms regarding sexual and reproductive health (SRH) influence their help-seeking behaviors. For instance, research has shown that discussing sex, especially premarital sex, is discouraged in some cultural contexts (Metusela, 2017). Engaging in premarital sex can lead to social ostracization and reduce marriage prospects (Metusela, 2017). Additionally, cervical cancer screening and HPV vaccination may not be supported for unmarried women due to cultural values emphasizing virginity (Metusela, 2017). Some individuals also face religious or cultural prohibitions against contraception use (Metusela, 2017).

Furthermore, socio-cultural norms prohibiting open discussions about sexual and reproductive health serve as a significant barrier to sexual health literacy and overall well-being. The inability to openly address topics such as menstruation, sex, and sexuality affects women's SRH and their healthcare-seeking behaviors, leading to discomfort and pain. Additionally, some women felt incapable of requesting their husbands to undergo testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), prioritizing their family's well-being over their own, especially those with numerous children (Metusela, 2017).

“Well, they're normal kids, you know? So they talk about their girlfriends and boyfriends”

We have interviewed Bart from Dreamers NL regarding social and cultural stigmas surrounding sexual and reproductive health (SRH) among undocumented individuals. Bart emphasized that undocumented youth are similar to documented individuals in their relationship experiences. However, he noted cultural differences among undocumented youth, particularly those less integrated into Dutch society, affecting their perspectives on sex and relationships. Bart highlighted potential clashes due to cultural differences, citing an example from a Dreamers weekend getaway where women expressed discomfort with a male participant's behavior. This example underscores the intersectional nature of SRH among undocumented youth, influenced by gender and cultural backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS & SOLUTIONS

Explanation, Information, and Education

Our research highlights that undocumented individuals often lack awareness of their rights and opportunities regarding reproductive care. Thus, there is a critical need to focus on informing this group about their rights and available resources. In an interview with Bart from Dreamers NL, it was noted that the lack of access to education poses a significant obstacle for Dreamers.

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural differences may lead to undocumented individuals not fully grasping the customs and practices in Dutch healthcare. Hence, it's vital for healthcare providers in the Netherlands to operate with cultural sensitivity (Bloemen, 2019). This entails recognizing potential cultural differences and possessing the skills to navigate them effectively (Bloemen, 2019). However, it's essential to avoid treating the target group as a separate entity and instead treat them like other patients (Hochheimer).

LIMITATIONS

This research primarily relies on literature, potentially limiting understanding of undocumented young adults' experiences and perspectives. Despite conducting four interviews with closely connected professionals, insights may be incomplete. Direct engagement with undocumented individuals was not possible, leading to a lack of insight into their reproductive health behaviors.

CONCLUSION

This research sheds light on the challenges undocumented young adults face in obtaining reproductive healthcare. It emphasizes the complex mix of social, cultural, and legal barriers that hinder their access to care. It also underscores the importance of targeted interventions, such as improved information provision and culturally sensitive care, to overcome these obstacles and improve the health outcomes of this population.

REFERENCES

- Alvarez-Nieto, C., Pastor-Moreno, G., Grande-Gascón, M. L., & Linares-Abad, M. (2015). Sexual and reproductive health beliefs and practices of female immigrants in Spain: A qualitative study. *BMC Women's Health*, 15, 71. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-015-0071-2>
- Bloemen, E. (2019). Ongedocumenteerde vreemdelingen in beeld. *Vakblad Sociaal Werk*, 20(6), 18-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12459-019-0079-8>
- Collins Hill, P. (2015) Intersectionality's Definitional Dillema, *Annau. Rev. Sociolo.* 41:1-20
- Froklage, A.C.M., van Midde, M.I., Schaap, A., & Vernooij, E.E. (2008). Verloskundige zorg aan ongedocumenteerde vrouwen: Het beleid toegepast in de praktijk. **TvV**, juli/augustus 2008, KNOV.
- Gonah, L., & Mukondwa, K. (2020). Accessing adolescent sexual and reproductive health services among undocumented migrants in South Africa: a documentary review. *Medical Journal of Zambia*, 43(4), 247-251. DOI:10.55320/mjz.43.4.317. [CC BY-NC 4.0]
- Linssen, F. (2021, 26 augustus). Huisartsen weigeren ongedocumenteerden: "Ik doe niet eens meer moeite om er een te vinden" [Artikel]. *NH Nieuws*. Geraadpleegd op 10 januari 2022, van <https://www.nhnieuws.nl/nieuws/292468/huisartsen-weigeren-ongedocumenteerden-ik-doe-niet-eens-meer-moeite-om-er-een-te-vinden>
- Heijden, P.G.M. van der, Cruyff, M. & Gils, G.H.C. van (2015). Schattingen illegaal in Nederland verblijvende vreemdelingen 2012-2013. WODC, Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie.
- Hintjens, H. M., Siegmann, K. A., & Staring, R. H. J. M. (2020). Seeking health below the radar: Undocumented People's access to healthcare in two Dutch cities. **Social Science & Medicine**, 248, 112822.
- Hochheimer, E. (Host). (2023, 14 juni). On De Praktijk: Aflevering 9 - Zorg aan ongedocumenteerden [Audio podcast episode]. Spotify. [https://open.spotify.com/episode/\[episode_id\]](https://open.spotify.com/episode/[episode_id])

- Metusela, C., Ussher, J., Perz, J., Hawkey, A., Morrow, M., Narchal, R., Estoesta, J., & Monteiro, M. (2017). "In My Culture, We Don't Know Anything About That": Sexual and Reproductive Health of Migrant and Refugee Women. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 24(6), 836–845. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-017-9656-1>
- Ministerie van Volksgezondheid. (2021, 28 juni). Vaccineren van mensen die ongedocumenteerd zijn [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG09x3LcuDY>
- Samen Sterk zonder Stigma. (z.d.). Home. Geraadpleegd van <https://www.samensterkzonderstigma.nl>
- De Vito, Elisabetta, de Waure, Chiara, Specchia, Maria Lucia & Ricciardi, Walter. (2015). Public health aspects of migrant health: a review of the evidence on health status for undocumented migrants in the European Region. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/326342>
- De Vries, M. (2018, 13 november). Living a life without papers: A case study on the feelings of belonging of undocumented people in Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. (2022, 27 oktober). Toekenning NWA voor onderzoek naar veerkrachtige samenlevingen. [Persbericht].