



## Community-Based HIV Prevention Research: The Maka Project Partnership

### Background

Women who use drugs and exchange sex for money, drugs or shelter as a means of basic survival (survival sex work) have remained at the edges of HIV and harm reduction policies and services in Canada despite evidence that of high rates of violence, poverty, and vulnerability to HIV.

### The Project: Design & Methods

From 2004-2006, researchers with the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and Women's Information Safe Haven (WISH) Drop-In Centre Society work together on a participatory-action research project to study HIV risk, barriers to accessing care, and the impact of current prevention and harm reduction strategies among women in survival sex work. The project had a research arm, and a service arm that carried on peer outreach and capacity-building among a team of women in survival sex work, supported by an open Community Advisory Board (CAB) that informed all stages of the project. Community members representing sex work, Aboriginal, and youth service organizations served as co-investigators. The project used a few different research methods including ongoing focus group discussions, social mapping, and a cohort who underwent HIV screening and completed interview questionnaires every 6 months for 3 years. The peer outreach team visited sex work strolls at different times of day and invited 205 women to participate in the cohort. The women were all 14 years of age or older, had used drugs (excluding marijuana) within the last month, and were active street-based sex workers. The women were asked about current and past experiences of sex work, violence and trauma, health and addiction service access, working conditions, and sexual and drug-related harms and received \$25 compensation for each visit.

### Strengths, Challenges & Ethical Considerations

Challenges from past studies of sex workers include not knowing how many sex workers there are, privacy and confidentiality due to stigma and criminalization, and ideas of sex work and victimization. Some research of sex work and HIV in the past has been oppressive, so the involvement of sex workers and community partner organizations in all aspects of the Maka Project was important to ensure accountability. Two ethical issues arose during the project: 1) HIV disclosure in survival sex work; and 2) the legal duty to report any violence among youth under 18 years old. Balancing the interests of sex workers, service organizations and academic researchers was a challenge of the participatory-action research process. Extensive training, weekly project staff meetings, and debriefing sessions helped ensure a positive experience for all partners.

### The Policy Implications

There is a lack of policy and interventions aimed at promoting the health and safety of women in survival sex work who use drugs. This community-based HIV prevention research partnership tried to provide evidence for prevention and policy reforms that meet the needs of women in survival sex work, and to offer insight into the strengths, challenges and ethical considerations of such research.

Shannon K, Bright V, Allinott S, Alexson D, Gibson K, Tyndall MW. Community-based HIV prevention research with substance-using women in survival sex work: The Maka Project. *Harm Reduction Journal*. 2007; 4:20.