



HIV Prevention & Harm Reduction Among Sex Workers: Beyond the Individual

Background

Recently there a lot of talk about how changing the environments that sex workers work in, and to the laws criminalizing sex work. It is important that the 'lived experiences' of sex workers should also be relied on to inform new HIV prevention and policy strategies for sex workers.

The Question

How do violence, power relations and the work environment impact HIV risk and prevention practices of women in street-based sex work?

The Study

Researchers from the Maka Project and what is now called the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) conducted a **participatory-action research project holding a series of focus group discussions co-facilitated by sex workers, community and research partners with 46 women in sex work in 2006**. GSHI now carries on this research as part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), an ongoing study on working conditions, health and safety in the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC in collaboration with a range of community partners. AESHA includes ongoing outreach to indoor and outdoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Key factors women reported **directly and indirectly impacting their agency, access to resources, and ability to practice HIV prevention and harm reduction**:

- Boyfriends as pimps and the 'everyday violence' of bad dates;
- A lack of safe spaces to take dates;
- Negative impacts of local policing;
- 'Dopesickness'; and
- the need to sell sex for drugs.

"It just seems that once you're taken away in a car, your power and control are gone."

- Excerpt from narrative of a street-based sex worker in Vancouver, BC.

The Policy Implications

- There is an urgent need for a renewed HIV prevention strategy that moves beyond focusing on the individual, through needle exchange, condom distribution and HIV testing, to interventions that focus on the environment and that facilitate 'enabling environments' for HIV prevention, including sex worker networks, safer sex work spaces, adequate housing and drug treatment services, and the decriminalization of sex work.

Shannon K, Kerr T, Allinott S, Chettiar J, Shoveller J, Tyndall MW. Social and structural violence and power relations in mitigating HIV risk of drug-using women in survival sex work. *Social Science & Medicine*, 2008; 66(4): 911-21.