



Violence Against Women in Street-Based Sex Work: Contributing Factors

Background

Gender-based violence is a global health and human rights issue with serious consequences for women and society. Despite evidence of negative outcomes associated with violence against women, including increased risk of HIV infection, research has focused on partner violence, and not on women in sex work, or on factors that contribute violence against women.

The Question

What factors contribute to violence against women in sex work in an environment of sex work criminalization?

The Study

Make Project and Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) researchers held **an 18-month study (2006-2008) with 237 women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC, through questionnaires and follow-up interviews**. This study is part of what is now AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), a 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 outreach to indoor and outdoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Analysis showed several **factors related to violence against women in sex work:**

- Homelessness;
- Inability to access drug treatment;
- Servicing clients in cars or public spaces;
- Past assault by police;
- Confiscation of drug supplies by police without arrest;
- Displacement from main streets due to policing.

Alarming rates of violence:

57% of women in sex work interviewed had experienced violence at least once during the 18-month study.

The Implications

- This study showed how criminalization, homelessness and lack of drug treatment relate to violence against women in street-based sex work.
- This research supports a need for policy reforms and **an evidence-based public health approach includes the decriminalization of sex work**.
- Improved access to housing and drug treatment, a scale-up of violence prevention efforts, including those that focus on improving police-sex worker relations, are crucial to stemming violence against women in sex work.

Shannon K, Kerr T, Strathdee SA, Shoveller J, Montaner JS, Tyndall MW. Prevalence and structural correlates of gender based violence among a prospective cohort of female sex workers. *BMJ* 2009; 339:b2939