



Pregnancy & Sex Work: Reproductive Health Needs of Women in Sex Work

Background

Research has focused on the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, but many women in sex work are of childbearing age and have unprotected sex, which can lead to unwanted pregnancy.

The Question

What are the experiences of women in street-based sex work who use drugs, with pregnancy and pregnancy prevention?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team interviewed **211 women in street-based sex work aged 25-39 who use drugs in Vancouver, BC** about pregnancy and contraceptive usage. This project is 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, that has ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

The narratives of the women showed:

Most had been pregnant more than once:

- 84% (176 women) said they had been pregnant at least once, with the typical number of lifetime pregnancies 3 to 4.

Low use of birth control methods like condoms or the pill:

- Only 29 women (14%) said they used condoms to prevent pregnancy;
- Only 2 women (1%) said they used birth control pills or intrauterine devices (IUDs);
- Those who had many pregnancies often had their tubes tied or a hysterectomy.

Pregnancy outcomes

Abortion & Miscarriage

- Over 33% said they had at least one abortion, and over 33% said they had at least one miscarriage.

Children often do not live with them

- Almost 33% reported having one or more children taken by protective services.
- Over 25% said they have one or more children being looked after by a family member.
- 20% said they currently have one or more children living with them.

The Policy Implications

- This study shows a need for better access and use of reproductive health services for women in street-based sex work, particularly access to woman-controlled contraceptives birth control, like hormonal shots, might be more effective, as the pill requires daily use and regular visits to a doctor.
- Pregnant women in sex work and/or who use drugs often have limited access to prenatal care due to stigma and fears children will be taken away, and require appropriate, non-judgmental services that include contraceptives, prenatal care, and mothering support.

Duff P, Shoveller J, Zhang R, Alexson D, Montaner JS, Shannon K. High lifetime pregnancy and low contraceptive usage among sex workers who use drugs – an unmet reproductive health need. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth*. 2011 Aug 18:11:61.