



Women in Sex Work Struggle to Find Safe, Secure Housing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Background

In Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, 16,000 people have unstable housing and over 6000 people live in single room occupancy (SRO) hotels. Homelessness and inadequate housing are common and are linked to poor health and greater risk of violence and death. Little research has looked at how transitional and low-income housing impacts the health and safety of women in sex work.

The Question

What are the impacts of transitional and low-income housing on the ability of women in sex works to protect their health and safety?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team held **12 group interviews with 73 women in sex work from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside who lived in low-income housing** including homeless shelters, transitional housing, and co-ed and women-only SROs. This project is part of 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. The project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Physical environment:

Women reported bedbugs and rats in SROs led them to transitional housing, like shelters and couch surfing, where they faced financial exploitation and greater sexual risk.

Structural environment:

Women reported curfews and guest policies forced them to rush, accept riskier clients, or work outdoors where negotiating safety and condom use are harder.

Social environment:

Women reported that in co-ed housing they experienced repeated violence by male residents and discrimination by male staff due to their sex work.

Positive impacts reported:

- Flexible curfews and the ability to bring family, friends and clients home as promoting agency and their ability to reduce risks;
- Women-only housing helped women create support systems resulting in safer work practices.

The Policy Implications

The study suggests an urgent need for low-income and transitional housing to meet minimum basic standards, and to develop long-term, safe and non-exploitative housing with and for women in sex work, to ensure spaces that promote their health, safety and freedom.

Lazarus L, Chettiar J, Deering , Nabess R, Shannon K. Risky health environments: Women sex workers' struggles to find safe, secure and non-exploitative housing in Canada's poorest postal code. Soc Sci Med. 2011 Dec; 73(11): 1600-7.