



HIV Prevention Among Women in Sex Work in Africa

Background

Sex work is an important source of income for many women in Africa, but many sex workers still have no access to reproductive health services. The criminalization of sex work; stigma from community and service providers; violence; substance abuse and limited access to health services and prevention tools contribute to high rates of HIV among women in sex work in Africa.

The Question

What are the current opportunities, barriers and suggestions to improve HIV prevention policy and programming for women in sex work in Africa?

The Study

Researchers with the Gender, Violence and HIV Team reviewed the current opportunities, barriers and suggestions to improve HIV prevention policy and programming for sex work in Africa following UNAIDS' three pillar approach to HIV prevention and sex work. The Gender, Violence and HIV Team is a team of researchers, representing many different sectors, including researchers from the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI). The team works together researching violence and HIV risk among vulnerable populations in Canada and globally. GSHI is a program of the BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners.

The Results

UNAIDS three pillar approach to HIV prevention and sex work recommends:

- 1) **Access for everyone to a comprehensive package of HIV services**, which includes reproductive health tools; voluntary and anonymous HIV counseling and testing; treatment of sexually transmitted infections, HIV and other infections; harm reduction for drug and alcohol use and psychosocial support services.
- 2) **A sex-worker supportive environment**, which requires including sex worker programmes in national HIV strategic planning; sex worker-led community mobilization and setting up sex work community networks to allow programmes to be developed.
- 3) **The reduction of sex worker vulnerability and addressing structural issues**, which involves decriminalization of sex work; development of supportive policy; gender equality and economic development.

The Policy Implications

- There is a need for a strong response by governments, accountability by funders, policy reforms and support for sex-worker-led initiatives, and interventions to engage with clients around HIV.
- The UNAIDS framework offers a guide to direct effective HIV responses, with evidence that shows that interventions, including African ones, work.
- **Evidence supports public health and human rights-based approaches to sex work that governments need to put in place with the support of donors.**

Scheibe A, Drame FM, Shannon K. HIV prevention among female sex workers in Africa. SAHARA J, 2012; 9(3): 167-72.